HELL is COMING
N.P. MARTIN
THE WATCHER'S SERIES
BOOK ONE

Hell Is Coming

(The Watcher's Series Book 1)

By

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Before You Go…

“Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

William Shakespeare

Prologue

The little girl knew there was a monster in the house.

She knew because she could hear it breathing outside her bedroom door. The low growling noises it made as it stood outside her door had woken her up, along with the creaking of floorboards in the hallway.

Loud creaking, like a great weight pressing down on the boards, like they were about to splinter and break.

There was something very bad outside her door, something that shouldn't be in the house.

A monster.

And it was going to get her.

The little girl screamed. Long and loud.

The monster outside her door growled in response. It thumped at the door, with a hand or a claw or a snout, she didn't know what.

She just knew it sounded like the monster wanted in.

It wanted her.

She screamed again, this time for her daddy. "Daddddeeee! Daddddeeee!"

Her screams were met with another scream.

Her mothers.

From her parents' bedroom down the hall.

Then two loud banging noises. Like a gun. The banging noises frayed the little girl's nerves further, causing her to startle violently after each one.

Then another scream from her mother. "Nooo!"

The little girl curled up in a ball on her bed, petrified, confused.

The monster outside her door growled, almost made a barking noise, and then stomped loudly down the hallway towards the little girl's

parent's room.

The little girl shut her eyes tightly as she heard the sound of her parent's bedroom door get smashed in, then more screams, from both her parents this time, but her fathers screams, they sounded different...

Her daddy sounded like he was getting hurt...really bad.

He sounded terrified.

Then she couldn't hear her daddy anymore. All she heard was her mummy's screams, awful to the little girl's ears and she shut her eyes tight as if would help to block out the screaming. It didn't. She opened her eyes again.

Something propelled her out of bed, even though she was half dead with fear, her seven year old mind in the process of shutting itself down to try and protect her from the horror she was experiencing.

But she had to see her daddy. She had to see.

Despite not wanting to, the little girl opened the door to her bedroom and looked out into the dark hallway. Piercing through the darkness was the sound of her mother's voice—pleading, angry, afraid. "Why did you have to kill him? Why? Why?"

Mommy...

The little girl stepped out into the hallway, shaking with fear, every small step she took towards her parent's bedroom agonizing, the whole time in fear of that monster flying out of her parent's bedroom to get her as well.

A splinter of wood from the smashed bedroom door pierced the soft skin of her foot, but the little girl didn't scream. She didn't make a sound.

She was too afraid too.

She could hear the monster breathing in the room, the room she was only inches away from now.

But there was another voice in the room as well. A strange voice. Too deep. Too scary. The voice of something very bad.

"You made a deal," the little girl heard the voice say. "I'm here to

collect.”

Then her mother. “Fuck you! This isn’t right! Stay back!”

“You must die first. This will hurt.”

“No!”

The little girl’s mother made a strangled screaming noise that abruptly stopped.

Walking over the splinters on the carpet, the little girl entered her parent’s room just as a dull orange light illuminated the whole room.

What the little girl saw when she entered the room was enough to shut down her fragile mind completely, but not before she witnessed a massive dog-like beast with red eyes standing over her daddy’s bloody and torn body. Not before she witnessed the monster who looked like a man—but who had horns and burning orange eyes—standing holding the limp body of the little girl’s mummy. Not before she looked into her mummy’s still open eyes and heard her say, “I’m sorry...” before the life went out of them. Not before she witnessed the monster man smile before walking into and disappearing down the hole in the floor with the orange light beaming out of it, the great beast that had been outside her bedroom door disappearing into the light as well.

After that, the little girl sat on the floor, curled up in a tight ball, and just lay there.

Leia Swanson stayed that way until someone found her the next day.

Chapter 1

“Give him hell, baby!”

To hear the girl standing by the boxing ring a few feet away from me, you would think she had never seen a sparring match before. She was pacing over-excitedly alongside the ring, her dyed blonde hair swinging over her huge cleavage, which threatened to spill out of her tight white top as she moved around. The collection of bangles she wore on one arm made jingling noises as she grabbed the thick bottom rope of the boxing ring and shook it while she yelled instructions to her boyfriend inside the ring, the one who was sparring my brother, Josh. “Watch that hook!” she would yell, or, “Get the takedown, baby, get the takedown!” Anyone would think her boyfriend was fighting for a UFC title, not doing some friendly sparring in a local MMA gym.

I’d only just arrived at the gym myself, having been scouting apartments since early that morning. It was now early afternoon and I knew Josh would still be training at this time, so I decided to call in and tell him about the apartments I’d viewed. It didn’t surprise me to find him in the ring sparring. Josh loved fighting more than anything else, more even than the ’69

Mustang he had parked outside, or the money he made from dealing weed. When it came to

fighting, everything else paled into insignificance for Josh, as his sparring partner was now finding out to his detriment.

I knew most of the guys who trained in the small gym, but not this one and certainly not the blonde bullhorn who stalked around outside the ring. I figured the guy had just joined the gym and wanted to try and prove himself against the champion fighter. Men and their egos.

As it happened, the guy wasn’t doing half bad, landing a few shots here and there. Josh still managed to dominate him easily though. My brother’s footwork was so superior, his opponent was finding it difficult to hit him or take him down, both of which he tried to the point of exhaustion. He was sweating, breathing heavy, under the influence of fatigue. Josh on the other hand, was calm, breathing normally, completely in control of himself.

“Come one, Aiden,” the blonde girl shouted. “Show this guy what you got!”

He's trying, I felt like saying, but didn't. Instead, I glanced briefly at her and she happened to turn her head at the same time to catch my eye.

"That your boyfriend in there or something?" she asked me, pushing her huge tits out, her hands on her skinny waist.

"My brother," I said, looking away from her.

"Your brother, huh?" She looked like she didn't believe me. Maybe she thought I didn't look like Josh, even though Josh and I were actually twins. Unless you really compared our faces

however, you would never know that were true. We both had dark, almost black hair in some lights, as well as brown eyes, although Josh's were more of a hazel green. The fact that we were different sexes also threw people a lot. This girl was too busy looking down her nose at me to notice. She seemed more interested in the way I dressed, the way I wore my long dark hair, which had plaits in both sides, or in the way I wore dark makeup around my eyes, as compared to her bright blue eye slap. Even girls have pissing contests, although she was doing all the pissing.

I politely ignored her and watched the sparring match. Josh's opponent was getting desperate, probably not helped by his girlfriend drawing attention to his every mistake like some nagging mother figure. He rushed forward and tried to land a big right cross on Josh, who effortlessly sidestepped and hit the guy with a left hook, knocking him down to the canvas.

The girl beside me went ballistic, started slapping the ropes with her red finger nailed hands.

"You fucking asshole! What the fuck was that about?"

I'd had enough of this bitch. "Hey!" I said. "Don't call my brother an asshole. It's sparring, people get hit."

Blondey snapped her head around, barely concealed rage in her face. She had found a new target for it too. Me. "Fuck you, bitch!" she spat and stomped over to me, heaving her chest out like her breasts were two weapons about to be deployed.

I stood facing her, outwardly calm despite the adrenaline spiking inside me. I had learned a long time ago that you can't show these bitches any fear or they'll eat you alive. I've seen it happen and it isn't

pretty. Growing up a foster kid, luckily I had a lot of practice dealing with girls like the one in the gym. I looked her straight in the eye for a moment, making sure she could see I wasn't afraid of her, which I wasn't. I didn't care if she could kick my ass. I'd had enough beatings over the years to handle one more. As long as she knew I didn't fear her. Once she saw that, I said, "Back off," in a controlled way that implied some level of threat without being overly aggressive. All you had to do was imply the threat was there and their imaginations would do the rest. Josh taught me that a long time ago. It had saved me from so many fights.

The girl seemed even more enraged at first, but as I held her gaze the rage drained from her face, replaced by doubt and uncertainty.

There it is. Exactly what I wanted.

Those tiny seeds of doubt and uncertainty would insure she wouldn't get physical. Physical violence needed a clear sense of purpose and certainty to propel it. The seeds that I planted killed that for her. She kept staring though, shifting from side to side, trying to save face.

"Jesus, Clara," the boyfriend said from the ring. "Leave it, will you. I took a shot, it's no big deal."

The blonde girl backed off to look at her boyfriend, who was standing beside Josh as they both took off their gloves. Josh had a slight smile on his face as he looked knowingly at me. He knew he didn't have to worry about me in situations like that.

"This asshole makes an idiot out of you and you're okay with that?" she said looking disgusted.

"No idiots here," Josh said. "Aidan sparred well. I'm glad he's a member here now."

Aidan smiled and looked happy at the reigning champion's endorsement of him. "Thanks man,"

he said to Josh and they shook hands.

The blonde girlfriend shook her head. "You know what, Aidan. Screw this. I try to help you, but you'll always be a chump to guys like this. That's why you never win. I thought I could help you be a winner, now I see you'll always be a damn loser." She shot a palm towards him. "See ya."

She turned to give me a final look of disdain, shoved her tits out and stomped across the gym, disappearing out the front door.

“Sorry for your loss,” I said to Aidan, who was making no move to go after his now former girlfriend.

“Don’t be,” Aidan said. “This shit happens at least once a week. I’ll call her later. She’ll be fine.”

Jesus. One born every minute.

All I could think to say was, “Okay.”

After Aidan left to hit the showers, Josh climbed out of the ring and sat on the edge after giving me a hug. “You believe that?” he said. “That girl was crazy. You alright?”

“Of course,” I said. “Not the first time a total bitch has squared up to me.”

Josh smiled. “So how’d the apartment hunting go? Find anything?”

“If you were there, you’d know, but since training came first as usual, I guess I’ll just fill you in.”

“I told you, I trust your judgment on these matters.”

“We’ve been staying in foster homes for the last eleven years,” I reminded him. “Mostly shitty ones at that. Hardly a good frame of reference, but anyway. I found two.”

Josh nodded. “Cool. Where?”

“Downtown, near the riverside. You said not to worry about rent, even though I think you’re being too extravagant. You don’t have to advertise the fact that you’re a dealer, you know.”

“Relax, Leia. The dealing is only temporary, you know that. I’ll quit when I make enough money from fighting.”

That could take a while, I thought. “I’m looking for a job anyway.”

“What about college? Studying art.”

“I mean a part time job, and that’s only if I get accepted to college. If I don’t then I’ll work fulltime.”

“You *will* get accepted. With your skills?”

I shook my head. “We’ll see.”

Josh frowned at me. “What’s up? You feeling alright?”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I’m fine.”

He looked harder at me. “You’ve been acting like you’ve had a lot on your mind lately.”

Okay. I see where this is going.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I said shaking my head. “I haven’t started using again.”

“I didn’t say you had. I’m just saying you’ve been acting weird the last few weeks.”

“I’m just nervous about moving out of Diane’s, that’s all. I’ve gotten comfortable there. Now we gotta go it alone. It’s a bit daunting.”

He put his arms around me. “Don’t worry. We’ll look after each other, like we always have.”

I smiled. “I know.”

“Alright,” he said, pulling away. “I’m going to finish training. See you back at Diane’s later.”

I said bye to my brother and left the gym, feeling almost ashamed that he thought I was using again. After the overdose last year, I think I’d learned my lesson as far as drugs were concerned.

Still, I couldn’t blame Josh for thinking otherwise. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been acting weird the last few weeks because I had, being withdrawn, distant, seemingly preoccupied all the time. All classic signs of my past Oxy use.

My behavior had nothing to do with drugs though.

It did however, have everything to do with the fact that I was walking in the direction of an occult bookstore two blocks away after I’d left the gym. I needed answers to questions I had, the main one being: *Why was I seeing demons everywhere that I went?*

I say demons, I didn’t know what they were. They were monsters in

appearance anyway.

Whether they were demons or not, I didn't know. Hell, I wasn't even sure if these demons were real yet. Certainly, a few weeks ago, when I first started seeing them, I thought I was going crazy for whatever reason.

Now I didn't think I was crazy anymore. What eventually made me realize that was the fact that I had seen one of these demons eleven years before when one of them took my mother away, after the beast with it was done killing my father. Not the easiest thing to forget, but over the years I learned to keep the memory in the darkest recesses of my mind, until recently that is, when more of these monsters started appearing in my life. I doubted it was all a coincidence and I was sure my past and present were connected somehow. I just had to find out how.

I was thinking about all this as I turned the corner into the side street where the occult bookstore was. Preoccupied, I walked straight into a tall guy in a suit, my face almost slamming into his chest. The guy put his arms out to stop me, his hands on my shoulders. "Shit, sorry," I said, looking up at him, an older guy in his forties, gelled gray hair, blue eyes—until, that is, his face changed completely in the time it took me to blink.

A demon stared back at me now. The demon's face was dark purple, with yellow eyes and thick horns that curved up and over its head. Its huge mouth was smiling and full of pointed teeth. It stopped smiling when it saw the look of horror and fear on my face. It let me go and took a step back. Growled at me. Did it know I could see it?

Oh God, it's worse than I thought! They know I can see them!

I staggered away from the demon as it snarled at me, then I bolted forward past it, sprinting down the street and only stopping when I got to the occult bookstore. When I looked up the street the demon was still standing there, staring back at me.

That was the first time I realized they could see me. Up until then, I had just been watching them discretely, mostly from a distance. Never up that close.

I stepped inside the occult book shop, as much for sanctuary as anything else.

A woman sat behind the counter. She looked old, but not that old.

Long gray hair, with a lined face, but still good looking and with intense green eyes that lit on me as soon as I walked in.

“Hello,” she said. “Can I help you?”

I did my best to smile after the encounter outside. By the looks of the store owner I was probably weirding her out, standing there like I’d just run from a monster, which I had. “Hi,” I said.

Whatever book the woman was reading she closed and placed it under the counter, then she stood up, appearing taller than I expected in a dark flowery dress. The way she looked at me she obviously thought I was in the wrong store, that maybe I was looking for the Eason’s on the main street. “Are you alright?”

Strangely not out of breath after sprinting outside, I took in the shop, which was cramped and tiny, old and new looking books stacked everywhere, on shelves, the walls, the floor, seemingly no organization to any of it.

How did anyone find what they were looking for in here?

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m looking for some books. On demons if you have them.”

“Demons,” the woman behind the counter said. “I hope you’re not in any trouble.” She said it with a smile on her face, like she was half joking.

I thought about the demon I’d bumped into outside, and the countless others I’d seen over the last few weeks. “No. I’m just working on a project for school, that’s all.”

“In that case, we have lots of books on demons. Any demons in particular?”

Scary ones…

“How about ones that appear human?”

The woman looked at me strangely. “All demons can possess people. They can hide inside a person.”

That would explain a lot.

“Is it possible for someone to… *see* these demons?” I asked her as casually as possible.

“Yes, it’s possible, if the demon shows themselves, or if you have the ability to see through their human facade. Are you saying you have seen demons, dear?”

By her tone, I knew she thought I was just some weird kid who needed to lay off the dope. “That would be impossible, wouldn’t it? Demons don’t really exist, do they?”

The woman stared at me for a long moment, then smiled. “Of course not, dear. Now which

books would you like?”

I spent the next ten minutes in the tiny shop as the woman showed me various books on

demonology and the occult. In the end, I bought two books, an old one on general demonology and a newer one that supposedly listed all the demons that existed in alphabetical order, along with illustrations of what they looked like. The books were not that much different from all the other books I had collected from various bookshops around the city and online the past couple of weeks, but I figured they might contain something useful. “Thanks,” I said to the woman.

“Be careful, dear,” the woman said, giving me a look like she knew something I didn’t.

“Sure,” I said, frowning. “Thanks again.”

I left the shop to get a bus back home to Diane’s, keeping my head down so I wouldn’t see any more monsters along the way.

Chapter 2

By the time the bus dropped me off down the street from Diane's place, I had looked through both of the books I bought in the occult shop. Although I recognized some of the demon faces illustrated in one of the books, I didn't glean much information from either of them as regards me being able to see them. Two more useless books to add to my ever growing collection.

When I started up the street towards home, a realization came to me. I was looking in the wrong places for help. If demons really did exist, and I was able to see them when seemingly no one else could, I doubted I would find any real information in easy to find books and websites. Most of that information had to be hokum. I had to look in deeper places and the best place to start was my own past, beginning with going back to my childhood home, the house I lived in along with my parents before they were both killed. If answers existed, maybe at least some of them would still be in that house in whatever form.

I smiled nervously to myself as I walked. Elated at the possibility of finding out what was going on with me, but frightened at the thoughts of going back to that house, which I hadn't been to in eleven years. I had checked it out on Google Maps quite a few times over the years, most recently about six months ago, just to see if it was still there. It was. It was also derelict, which was good news for me. I decided I would borrow Josh's car—who was home already, his black Mustang parked on the road outside the house—and go check out the house. I would take my friend Kasey with me. She would be happy to ride along with me.

When I came to the front gate of Diane's house I stopped and looked down the street at a man who hadn't been there when I looked a second ago. It was like he just appeared out of thin air.

The man was dressed in dark clothes and even though he was far away I could tell he was smiling at me. My stomach lurched when I noticed his eyes glow a deep orange in their sockets.

Another demon. But why was he here on the street where I lived? Why was he standing smiling at me?

My stomach lurched again when I considered the demon had probably sought me out. Maybe

because he knew I could see him and the rest. Did that make me a threat to them now? Was I to be killed in the same way my parents were?

As I struggled to control my breathing, I wondered what to do. If I was a target, was Josh and Diane now targets also?

The sheer malevolent presence of the demon staring at me from down the street was enough to freeze me to the spot. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before, like icy fingers reaching inside me, probing into my mind. It was horrible, violating.

Then the feelings stopped and the demon disappeared into thin air again.

My shoulders dropped like a massive weight had been lifted off me. I could move again. The black tendrils that had been feeling their way into my brain were now gone.

“Jesus Christ,” I said and rushed up the pathway to the house. I opened the front door and shut it behind me, trying not to look too shaken while I walked into the living room. The TV was on and Josh and Diane were in the small kitchen beyond the living room. Diane, an ample woman in her fifties with long wavy brown hair, smiled at me, as she always did when she saw me. Diane smiled a lot. I don’t know how she did it. Her smile waned slightly when she looked at me though.

“Are you okay, Leia?” she asked, wiping her hands with kitchen roll. I smelled pasta. Josh was already at the breakfast bar, stuffing his face.

“Sure,” I replied, still hovering by the front door. “It’s just cold and windy out there.” I made a show of trying to warm myself up by rubbing my arms, even though the adrenaline still coursing through my system made me far from cold. Josh was looking at me as well while he chewed on his pasta. To him, I was just acting weird again, something he was probably getting used to by now.

“Come and eat some pasta,” Diane said readying a plate for me. “It’ll warm you up. Then you can tell me all about the apartments you viewed today.”

I smiled and nodded. “Sure. Just let me freshen up first. All that walking.” I wrinkled my nose in a ridiculous manner and made a dash for the stairs before either of them could say anything else.

Upstairs, I went straight to my room and closed the door behind me. Then I let out a long breath as I paced around the small room. I say paced, it was one step both ways. The clutter in the room—the piles of books, canvas's I'd painted, sketch pads, clothes—making it impossible for me move any further. Tidiness wasn't really my strong point. Diane, bless her, had learned to live with it, choosing not to go into my room these days, probably also afraid of what she might find in there. The occult stuff freaked her out, God fearing woman that she was.

When I started to calm down I sat on the edge of my small single bed and tried unsuccessfully to erase the memory of the demon from outside. The best I could do was to tell myself that the demon wasn't there for me, that it was just a coincidence it was in the same street as where I lived.

I had trouble believing that though. The way the demon had looked at me, its presence invading me. It had to be targeting me for some reason, and the only reason I could think off was because I could see the demons for what they were.

Jesus Christ. Why was this happening to me? What the fuck was going on?

I held my head in my hands for a minute while I had a mild panic attack, then I told myself to get it together, to stop freaking out. Told myself if the demon wanted me, it would have taken me there and then, outside in the street.

I had no doubt it could have.

It could just have been trying to scare me, as some sort of warning maybe, or just out of sheer malice. It was a demon after all. Wasn't malice their speciality?

Standing, I went and stood in front of the full length mirror attached to the wall, the one surrounded by reams of sketches and paintings of fantasy figures that were of other worlds.

Ironic that I should spend years creating fantasy art featuring strange and monstrous things that are not dissimilar to the monsters currently haunting me. I looked at the mirror, at my drab self reflected back at me. I looked better when I was full blown addicted to Oxy, and that's saying something. Back then I looked awful—drawn, pale, underweight. Right about how I looked now, except the circles under my eyes looked darker and the eyes themselves, normally bright and lustrous, were now dull and haunted.

Trying not to be too disturbed by my appearance in the mirror, I straightened up my dark green overcoat and pulled up my faded jeans. Then I made a feeble effort at fixing my hair that didn't in any way make it look less dishevelled. After a final sigh, I left the bedroom and went downstairs to put on appearances, pretending to eat the pasta Diane gave me, trying to sound excited and enthusiastic when I told her about the apartments I saw that day, and the whole time being aware that Josh was watching me wordlessly, knowing full well that he knew something was up with me but that he wasn't sure enough to push me on exactly what was wrong.

After fifteen minutes of putting on appearances, I managed to talk Josh into letting me borrow his car. He argued at first, but gave in when I promised to have it back by eight thirty as he had plans to go out.

When I left the house I stopped by the gate, looked up and down the street. No sign of the demon guy from earlier, which made me feel only slightly less anxious, especially as he could appear and disappear in a split second.

I walked quickly to the car and got in. Then I called Kasey. "Hey," I said when she picked up.

"Fancy a ride in my brother's car?"

"Fuck yeah," Kasey said straight away. "Where we going?"

"Somewhere dark."

Chapter 3

Kasey was waiting for me on the corner of Green Street, outside the derelict building that she called home most nights. She was wearing her usual black leather jacket with a dark hoodie underneath, black jeans and black boots that had seen better days. Kasey herself looked like she had seen better days, but then not having a real place to live would do that to a person. I didn't know how she did it. As much as I hated some of the foster homes I stayed in over the years, I could never quite bring myself to do what Kasey did, just bail and go live rough on the streets.

Kasey's situation had been worse than any I'd ever been in though.

"Hey, girl," Kasey said as she bounced into the car. "Nice ride. Can't believe Josh actually let you take it. Awesome." She smiled at me with slightly yellowed teeth. Kasey looked younger than eighteen. Her raven black hair was close cropped except for a long piece of fringe that hung limply down one side of her forehead. Nose and eyebrow piercings added to the effect, making her look every inch the orphan street kid.

"Hey, Kase," I said. I drove out into the rush hour traffic, glad Kasey was accompanying me on my dubious expedition into the past.

She was checking out the car and nodding. "This is awesome. I could live in this car."

"I don't think my brother would appreciate that."

"What are you trying to say, Princess? Huh?"

She was all fake attitude as she smirked at me. She liked to call me 'Princess' sometimes, after Princess Leia from Star Wars. As a fan of the movie, I let her get away with it. "Nothing—just that Josh loves this car more than life itself."

"That's sad, man, loving a car like that. It's just a car."

"You said it was awesome a minute ago."

"It is, but it's still just a car." She turned her attention to the CD player. "What's Josh got in here?" When she switched the CD player on, loud metal music came blasting out of the

speakers—Pantera. “Alright!” Kasey banged the dash in time with “By Demon’s Be Driven”.

I was more of an old school rock fan myself, but I didn’t mind the metal. It kind of took my mind off where we were going. I wasn’t sure how to feel about revisiting the old house. There was dread in my stomach at the prospect, which is partly why I asked Kasey to come along. “We got the apartment,” I told her excitedly. “We’re moving this weekend.”

“Holy shit that’s awesome, Princess. No more foster homes, huh? Free at last.”

“Yep, just me and Josh.”

She seemed slightly miffed by the news, like I was moving forward, leaving her behind. I knew that’s what she was thinking. It’s what I would have thought if I were her. “I get to stay, right?”

“Anytime.”

Just not all the time.

As much as I loved her, I still needed space. Josh wouldn’t put up with her all the time either.

“What about Josh? I’m not exactly his favorite person. He thinks I’m a skanky street kid that needs a good wash.”

I had to refrain from smiling when she said that. “Josh doesn’t think that at all.” We both knew I was lying, but she went along with it anyway. “Let me worry about him.” I slowed to let a middle aged woman cross the road. Half way across she looked in our direction. Her pretty face flickered and her features morphed into something disgustingly toad-like. Her eyes went beetle black. I casually looked out the side window until she passed before driving off again.

“Holy shit, I almost forgot,” Kasey exclaimed suddenly.

“What?” I asked, still mildly freaked by the woman/demon I just saw.

“I was chillin’ in my room last night, smokin’ some heavy weed, man—awesome shit by the way—remind me to get you some.” I nodded. Normally I got my weed from Josh, him being a dealer and all. Kasey sometimes managed to get good stuff though. “Anyway, I’m lying there, stoned to the bone, when I hear these screams.”

“Screams?”

“Yeah, like seriously fucking loud screams, man.”

“Okay. You’re sure it wasn’t the weed?”

“What? No! I know what I heard—screams, coming from the basement.”

“The basement? That’s not creepy or anything.”

“I shit myself. I just sat up and was like—what the fuck! I was seriously freaked, I tell you. You know what that place is like at night.”

I nodded, knowing all too well. “Creepy as hell.”

“Right, with all the noises and everything, and with just me being in there…” She trailed off like she had freaked herself out and she shuddered. “Anyway, it sounded like someone was being tortured. It was fucking awful, man. Scared the shit out of me.”

“You didn’t go and investigate?” I had a half smile on my face. I knew the question would get a rise out of her and it did.

“Are you kidding me?” She shook her head as I laughed. “I wasn’t going anywhere. I pulled the blanket over me and hid there the rest of the night.”

“All joking aside, that’s still screwed up. Maybe you should find somewhere else to stay.” I was serious. I didn’t want her dead body turning up in that shithole one day.

“What for? No where’s safe.”

She had a point. Living on the streets kind of limited your options when it came to finding safe shelter. Maybe that’s why Mercy City had the highest rate of missing kids in the entire country.

“We have to get you sorted with a proper apartment.”

“Yeah, and how you gonna to do that?”

“There’s help you can get.” I knew she wasn’t going to like the next part. “Plus, you would have to get a job somewhere.”

She snorted with derision. “Are you fucking kidding me? Who would

employ me? What the hell would I do anyway, wait tables?"

"Might be a start."

She shook her head emphatically. "Fuck that. You know how I feel about people. People are shit." She smiled sweetly. "Except you, my dear."

"Of course, dear," I smiled back. "I'm just saying though, it's an option."

"We'll see." She stared out the window, her tone making it clear she didn't want to talk anymore about it.

That wasn't the first time we had that particular conversation about her future. I mentioned to her a few times about leaving the street life, but the truth was I didn't think she would, not until she started believing she deserved better. And Kasey *did* deserve better. If anyone was a victim of circumstances, it was Kasey.

"So tell me again why we're going to your old house?" she asked.

We were on the bridge that would take us over the river to the west side of the city. For the first time I noticed there were small gargoyles on top of the light posts that ran intermittently along both sides of the bridge, the lights themselves placed on top of the gargoyles heads. Sometimes I wondered if the whole city hadn't been built by demons, like Mercy City was just a tribute to Hell. "I just want to see," I said. "I haven't been back there since… we left."

"Why though? Isn't this going to be like, painful for you or whatever?"

I shrugged. "Probably, yeah. It's just something I have to do, though." I told Kasey years ago about my past, back when we first met in high school. She maintained she believed me, but I didn't think she did. I had come to realize that my account of what happened to my parents was too weird and disturbing for people to take seriously. When it first happened and I was a kid, I told everyone the same story and everyone without exception thought it was the ramblings of a traumatized little kid. After a while I learned not to say anything about what I saw because people thought I was nuts. That's also why I told no one, not even Kasey, about the demon faces.

Pretty soon I had us driving through the residential area where my parents used to live. It hadn't changed at all in eleven years. There were still the same rows of small wood paneled houses with patches of

grass out front and the occasional tree that lined the sidewalk. It was weird seeing it all again. Fragments of long forgotten memories and feelings from childhood were already forming in the back of my mind, along with feelings I hadn't felt in years.

"Sleepy place," Kasey said. "You grew up here?"

"Yeah," I said, having no problem finding the street I used to live on. I stopped the car by the first house in the row. "This is it."

Kasey stared out the window at the house. "Doesn't look like anyone has lived in it since."

"No." A sullen look marked my face as I stared at the house. It was, as Kasey said, not in great shape, certainly not the quaint little house I remembered. All the windows and doors were boarded up, most of the paint had flaked and fell off the wood, and the lawn out front was just a patch of weeds. It made me sad to see the house in such disrepair. Despite what happened, I still had some happy memories living there.

"Hey, you okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's go look inside."

The ramshackle state of the house looked more vivid from outside the car, its dire state even more apparent. I looked down the street at the other houses, all them like new compared to the one we were standing in front of. I couldn't help feeling slightly embarrassed, even though I didn't live there anymore. I glanced at the house next door and wondered if Mr. and Mrs.

Wheatley still lived there. Josh and I had stayed with them for a couple of days after our parents were killed. They were nice people and our parents got along well with them, often going to each others' houses for barbecues and drinks. I noticed a curtain twitch in the living room but didn't see anyone.

"How do we get in?" Kasey said. "Place is boarded up."

"Round the back." We walked up the side of the house, around to the small backyard that was choked with weeds. I remembered playing in that garden every day. My father used to keep the lawn immaculate, as he did the rest of the house. The back door had a plywood board nailed over it.

"Should have brought a crowbar," Kasey said, pulling at the board.

“It’s nailed shut.”

I looked at the board for a second and then grabbed one side of it with both hands, getting a good grip on it before pulling hard. I was surprised when half the board came partially away with a loud creaking sound. Another good pull and the board went thudding to the ground.

“Holy shit!” Kasey said. “When the hell did you get so strong? You been juicing without telling me?”

“Diane feeds us lots of greens.” I was looking down at the wood that lay flat on the ground. I felt pretty awesome that I was able to rip the thing off just like that. It wasn’t even hard to do. I really was getting stronger, though I had no idea how or why.

“Yeah, right,” Kasey said. “Let’s see you get the door open then.”

The back door was locked and it had another plywood board in place of the glass that used to be in the window. I lifted my leg and aimed a kick just to the side of the door handle and the door flew open with a crack, the frame around it splintering.

Yep, I was definitely getting stronger.

“I say again, what have you been taking and where can I get some?”

“Come on,” I said, ignoring her. “Let’s go in.” My stomach felt funny as I stepped inside the gloom of my old house. I felt like turning and running back to the car, never to return. I doubted whether it was a good idea to have come. The inside was practically in darkness. I was scared for no reason. The oppressive gloom of the place was also slightly triggering my claustrophobia. The claustrophobia was something I had since I was a kid. It normally wasn’t that bad unless I found myself in small dark spaces, which thankfully was almost never. Somehow the mix of feelings swirling in me was triggering it. “We need a flashlight.” I quickly backtracked outside again.

“There’s one in the trunk, I’ll go get it.” Before Kasey could even protest I was walking down the side of the house to the car, my heart thumping loudly in my chest.

What the hell did I hope to achieve by coming here, apart from dredging up a load of bad memories?

Having just gotten the flashlight from the trunk of the car, I was

walking back up to the house again when I noticed a figure in the house next door, standing by the living room window. The figure stepped back when I looked. I couldn't tell if it was Mrs. Wheatley or not.

"I'm glad you're back," Kasey said when I returned with the flashlight. "This place is giving me the creeps. Seriously, I thought where I lived was bad."

"You can wait here if you want," I said, hoping she would do the opposite.

"I'm not letting you go in there alone. What do you take me for?"

"Let's go then," I said, relieved that I wouldn't have to this alone. Switching on the flashlight I stepped inside the house again, Kasey close behind. We stood in the kitchen as I moved the light beam around, illuminating the dark interior. Apart from the musty smell and thick layers of dust, everything was exactly as I remembered. Even the same table and chairs were in the dining area.

"God this is weird."

"I'll bet." Kasey was holding onto my arm.

Opening the kitchen door, we stepped out into the hallway and made our way past the stairs and into the living room. The room contained the same soft leather sofa my parents bought when they moved into the place. Looking at it, I got flashbacks of sitting up there with my dad watching cartoons, my dad laughing more than I did at the animated antics of the characters on screen. I tore my gaze from the sofa to look around the rest of the room. It looked like people had been hanging out in there at one point because there were empty bottles and beer cans

everywhere.

Probably local kids using the place as a drinking den.

The widescreen TV that used to hang on the wall above the fireplace was gone, which was no surprise. So was the stereo that used to sit in the corner of the room. I stood for a few minutes, shining the light around, not really sure of what I was looking for, just anything that would grab my interest. Nothing did. Underneath the dust and grime and spider webs, everything seemed normal and painfully familiar.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said, my voice sounding weirdly loud in the heavy silence.

The stairs creaked and groaned as I walked up them with Kasey bringing up the rear. My heart rate sped up and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise as I neared the top of the stairs. Fear didn’t feel very far away the moment I stepped onto the landing. I was afraid to even breathe as I shone the flashlight at my parents’ old bedroom door and held it there for a moment.

“Was that your parents’ room?” Kasey whispered. I could hear the unease in her voice and I thought the nostalgia trip I had her on must have been weird for her as well, maybe more so.

“Yes,” I whispered back hoarsely, my mouth dry and my throat tight. I almost decided to run back down the stairs, but I fought the sense of panic, pushing it down deep.

I have to do this.

I swung the flashlight across the landing, past the open bathroom door to my old bedroom. “That one was mine.” I expected some kind of reply from Kasey but she was just standing behind me, back to holding onto my arm.

Slowly, I walked to the door, pausing for a second before opening it, swallowing hard as the door swung open to reveal my old bedroom. Apart from the dust and cobwebs, I could hardly believe that everything was exactly the same. Nostalgia mixed with heavy sadness came over me as I shone the light over the shelves above the bed. All my books and stuffed toys were still there, as were the drawings I had stuck all over the walls. A lump formed in my throat and tears ran down my cheeks as I remembered how my dad used to tuck me into bed at night, choosing a book from the shelf to read to me before kissing me goodnight, leaving the door slightly ajar because he knew I didn’t like it fully closed.

Kasey must have heard me sniff back the tears. She rubbed my arm. “You alright?”

“Oh god,” I said, sniffing back more tears. “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

“I don’t even know why you’re here. This is crazy, putting yourself through this.”

I hadn't even gotten to my parents' room yet. "I'm fine." I wiped the tears from my face and forced myself to get a grip. "Just one more room." I slid past Kasey and walked back across the landing to my parents' old room. Taking a deep breath, trying not to drag things out, I opened the door and shone the flashlight into the room.

Both of us gasped when we saw the blood stains on the beige carpet. It was the first time I had seen the room since the night my parents were killed. My stomach tightened as panic gripped me.

In my mind, I was seeing my father lying dead on the floor, covered in blood, a huge dog-like beast hovering over him, its eyes red and burning as it snarled at me, baring its massive pointed teeth.

Beside the beast was a scaly-skinned demon with glowing yellow eyes and two huge horns that curved over its head and down its back. The Hellhound's master maybe? It was holding my mother in its arms as it stood in front of a circle of orange light on the floor, a portal of some kind.

My mother was still alive. Her face was covered in blood, and she told me she was sorry. I remember thinking, *Why are you sorry, Mommy?*

Then the demon stepped into the portal and disappeared into it. The beast followed the demon, the thick hairs on its huge back bristling as it gave me a final snarl before jumping into the portal, and then the light in the floor disappeared.

After that, there was just me standing in the doorway, frozen, petrified, not knowing what to do.

And my father lying dead on the floor.

Daddy…

I jumped when Kasey nudged me. "Sorry," she whispered. "I think we should go. This isn't good for you being here." Kasey sounded frightened herself, her normal fearless demeanor gone, like my fear was rubbing off on her.

"Just a second." I willed myself to move further into the room as I swung the flashlight around, searching, but not sure for what. Almost everything in the room had been taken out by the cops as evidence. The only things left were an empty wardrobe, empty chest of drawers and the bed which had been stripped of the sheets. I spent a few minutes looking around while Kasey waited by the door and looked

over her shoulder constantly like she expected something to grab her at any second.

Nothing of interest jumped out at me. I shook my head and walked out of the room.

A moment later we were outside and walking back to the car. “Waste of time,” I muttered to myself.

Kasey said nothing. She was just glad to be out of that house. As we went to get back in the car, a voice called from the house next door. I looked up and saw a woman standing by the front door. I recognized her immediately. “Mrs. Wheatly?” I called.

“Yes,” she said. “Leia?”

I smiled. “Yes, it’s me, Mrs. Wheatly.” Kasey waited by the car while I went to speak with Mrs.

Wheatly. She didn’t look like she had changed much, still like a typical soccer mom with her auburn hair tied up in a bun and dressed in a tight purple jogging outfit.

“I can’t believe it’s really you,” she said as I stood in front of her.

“It’s me,” I said awkwardly.

She smiled, her warm blue eyes looking me over. “You’ve grown so much.”

“Well, it’s been eleven years.”

“Yes, it has, hasn’t it?” She smiled. “I have something for you.”

I frowned. “For me?”

“Yes. Just a moment.” She disappeared into the house and I looked over at Kasey, who was leaning on the car with her arms folded like some kind of scruffy rebel character. I shrugged.

“Here we go.” Mrs. Wheatly had returned with a white envelope in her hand, which she handed to me. My name was written on the front. “Your mother gave me that about a year before

she…you know.”

I nodded. “Why would she give you this?” I was dying to open the

envelope. Something hard was sliding around inside of it.

“She never really said, she just told me to give you that if anything ever happened to her.”

“If anything ever happened to her?”

Mrs. Wheatly looked pained as she folded her arms. “Your mother helped with a problem I had once.”

“What kind of problem?”

“That doesn’t matter.” She shook her head and a tight smile pinched her face. “She was a good woman, your mother. I never believed she had anything to do with… what the papers said about her at the time… that she…”

“Killed my father,” I said bluntly. “I know.”

“Well, anyway, she gave me that one day, said I was to give it to you if she ever… you know.

But I never saw you again after that.” She smiled her nervous smile again. “Not until now.”

I looked down at the grubby white envelope in my hands. The trip hadn’t been a total waste of time after all. “Thanks, Mrs. Wheatly.”

“Catherine, call me Catherine.”

“Thanks, Catherine. I really appreciate you holding on to this all this time.”

“It was the least I could do, and your mother was very adamant that you get that.”

I said ‘bye’ to Catherine Wheatley and went back to the car where Kasey was still waiting.

“What was that about?” Kasey asked as we got into the car.

I tore open the envelope. Inside was a piece of paper with an address on. There was also a key attached to a plastic keying, with the number 101 written on it. I handed the piece of paper with the address on to Kasey. “You know where that is?”

“Sure,” Kasey said. “It’s a storage facility. It’s a few miles from here, I

think."

"A storage facility?"

"Yeah. That woman gave you this?"

"It's from my mom."

"Your Mom? Holy shit, really?"

I nodded. "Yep. Weird, huh?"

"Also awesome. Your mom must have left you stuff. Are we checking this out?"

Kasey was more excited than I was to find out what was in the storage facility. While I was definitely interested in finding out, I also felt a sense of dread as I wondered why my mom would leave me the key to a storage facility of all things. What was she hiding there that she wanted me to see? It must be important or she wouldn't have asked Mrs. Wheatley to hold onto the key.

I got a text from Josh, reminding me to have the car back by seven. It was five-thirty. Enough time to check out the storage facility.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Kasey said excitedly, waving the piece of paper with the address on it. "Let's go, let's check this out. Don't you want to know what's in the lockup?"

"Course I do, it's just weird is all."

"But this is why you came here, right? To see what you could find. Well, you found something.

You should be happy."

"Nothing about this makes me happy," I said, starting the car and pulling out on the street. "It's just more mystery on top of mystery."

"But in a cool way," Kasey said. "You have to admit this is cool. I mean a lockup, who knows what we'll find there."

"That's my point."

Chapter 4

About twenty minutes later, we arrived at the storage facility. It was just a single long concrete building in need of a coat of paint with a neon sign on top and a small parking lot out front.

There was only one other car in the lot: a beat up old Ford. I parked the Mustang in front of the main entrance to the building. A sign above a set of double doors read WESTLAND STORAGE.

Through the glass doors I could see an old guy behind a reception counter. Kasey and I climbed out of the car and went inside the building.

The old guy at reception was sitting in a chair, his feet up on another as he stared at a small TV

on a counter next to a bowl of hard boiled sweets. I was frowning at the bowl of sweets when the old guy turned his attention to us, or rather to me. He smiled with broken, yellowed teeth.

“What can I do for *you*?” he said in the sleaziest voice ever.

I had to stop myself from shivering. The old guy was wearing a red and black checkered hunting cap and his beady blue eyes were sharp and piercing. Looking at him, I was reminded of a serial killer I had once read about—Ed Gein, an old man who had killed and skinned numerous women so he could make his own ‘woman suit.’ Kasey ignored the old guy, helped herself to one of the boiled sweets and stood sucking on it beside me.

“I have this key,” I said, holding up the key that was in the envelope. “I think it’s for one of the lockups here.”

The old man removed his feet from the chair and slowly stood. He was taller than I expected when he finally straightened up. He also smelled of booze and stale cigarettes. He held out his hand. “Let’s see, shall we?”

My skin crawled as I dropped the key into the old man’s gnarly hand. He kept his eyes on me for a second, a pervy smile on his face. The smile disappeared when he looked at the key.

“Is it one of yours?” I asked him.

“It is,” he said, nodding, grim-faced like the key was some sort of talisman that had found its way back to him. “I know this number. How’d you get this key?”

“It belonged to her mom,” Kasey said, loudly sucking on her candy.

The old man narrowed his eyes and nodded like something had suddenly dawned on him. “She told me you might show up one day. Forgot all about her since she hasn’t been around in over ten years. Where is she?”

“Dead,” I said. “How well did you know her?”

“Dead, huh?” He thought for a moment. “Seven years she came and went. A mysterious type.

Didn’t talk much.”

Like my mom would ever talk to a creep like you.

“She was a good looking woman, though. *Sexy*.” His eyes ran up and down my body.

God, I thought as his eyes fell to my tits. *Is he mentally undressing me?* “Which way is the lockup, then?” I said, barely able to keep the disgust from my voice.

He pointed down a hallway. “Down there, turn left, keep going. It’s near the end.”

“Right,” I said, nodding and then waited. “Key?”

“You look just like her,” he said, handing me the key. My fingers latched on to the metal, but he held it tight as I tried to take it. “Scared me, that woman did. Something about her. You have her eyes.”

I pulled the key from his gnarly grip. “Thanks for your help.” I walked off down the hallway, glad to get away from the old man. Kasey helped herself to a handful of sweets before jogging after me. “Seriously?” I said to her.

“These things are awesome.” She offered me one of the sweets.

I shook my head. “Don’t think so.”

God knows where those things have been.

Kasey shrugged. “*He* was a fucking creepazoid, huh?”

“A lovely man indeed.” We turned left down the dimly lit hallway, our footsteps echoing, steel shutters on either side of us. On the wall between the shutters there were painted numbers. I kept looking until I found 101. “Here it is.” I stood in front of the shutter.

“What are you waiting for?”

What the hell is wrong with me? After all this time I may just get answers to some of the questions that plagued me and all I can do is stand like a dummy, afraid to see what’s inside.

I knelt down and slid the key into the lock, turned it, hesitated for a second and then pulled up the shutter. The room before me was in darkness until I found the light switch.

“Holy shit.”

“Not what I was expecting,” Kasey said. “Not by a goddamn long shot.”

We both stepped inside the room and I quickly pulled the shutter back down. If anyone saw what was in that lockup they would call the cops immediately. “I can’t believe this.”

The lockup wasn’t so much a lockup as an armory. On the back wall of the room, resting on brackets, were a number of weapons, including various types of guns, swords, knives and other barbaric looking things I didn’t immediately recognize.

Was that a mace? And a club with spikes on it? What the hell did my mom need those for?

There were also stacks of old books all over the concrete floor, wooden crates filled with boxes of bullets, and on one wall, various jars and bottles of different sizes containing God knows what.

The room was small, but it was packed with stuff that I didn’t recognize as ever belonging to my mom. The smell of musty old books, mildew and a sharp metallic smell hung in the air, like the shutter hadn’t been opened in years, which it probably hadn’t, not since the last time Mom had been there. It had a lost tomb kind of feel to it, a place filled with dangerous and mysterious items.

Who was paying the rent on this place if my mom was dead?

“Jesus,” Kasey said, looking around the room with wide eyes. “What the hell was your mom into? Was she like a domestic terrorist or something, one of those survivalist nutjobs? That would maybe explain some of this stuff here.”

“My mom wasn’t a nutjob.” Not that I knew of anyway.

“Sorry,” Kasey said and quickly changed the subject. “Is that weed?”

I looked to where she was pointing. There was a bench that ran the full length of the back wall where the weapons hung. On the bench there were more weapons and ammunition, some dusty looking books and various glass jars with weird stuff in them that wasn’t immediately

identifiable, although I wasn’t sure I wanted to classify half that stuff. Kasey picked up one of the jars. “This looks like weed, man.” She opened the jar and recoiled at the smell. “Holy shit that is definitely *not* weed. Jesus…” Her eyes were watering. “What the hell is this stuff?”

“Don’t mess with it,” I said. Something told me that whatever was in those jars and bottles could be dangerous. My mother didn’t store them away in secret for nothing.

Why did she store any of this stuff away in secret? Apart from the obvious of not wanting anyone to find it. But what did she use it all for?

“There’s something else here.” Kasey handed me a manila envelope which I opened. Inside there was a book and a CD. The disc had my name written on it.

“This just gets weirder by the minute,” I said.

“No shit,” Kasey said. “What are all these weapons for? There’s some really cool shit here.” She took one of the swords off the wall and started swinging it around.

“Hey,” I snapped. “Put it back.”

Kasey looked at me like a child who had just been scolded. “You’re no fun.”

“All this shit is dangerous. Just don’t touch anything.”

I opened the book that was in the envelope. It was thick and leather

bound and every page appeared to be filled with my mother's handwriting, along with sketches of monsters who were more than familiar to me by now. "This is crazy." I shook my head.

"What?" Kasey was picking up knives from the bench and examining them.

"Nothing." I closed the book. "I told you not to touch anything."

"Jeez, how could I not touch this stuff?" She threw her arms out. "Look around, man. Aren't you excited by all this?"

Excited?

Not really, not a 'kid in a toy shop' excited like Kasey. The truth was I didn't know what to think. If all the stuff in that room once belonged to my mom, then she had been some kind of hunter. There was no other way to explain it. I would have thought her insane if it wasn't for the fact that I'd seen monsters with my own eyes. Not to mention what I witnessed as a kid—the demon taking my near dead mother away. As crazy as it seemed, it was all starting to make a mad kind of sense.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Josh texting: WR R U? I texted back that I was on my way home. "We gotta go."

"But we only just got here," Kasey protested. "There's so much stuff to look through."

"Another time. Josh needs the car."

"Alright." Kasey slumped her shoulders and shuffled out of the room once I'd opened the shutter again. I took one last look into the room before switching off the light and pulling the shutter down.

"What do you think is on the disc?" Kasey asked.

Standing in the hallway I looked at the disc that I held in my hand along with my mother's journal. "Don't know." That was the truth.

"You think she left you a message, like a video message? That would be cool."

My stomach tightened at the thought of seeing my mom again, even if it was just on video. I hurried back up the corridor, my mind set on getting home, seeing what was on the disc, and reading the journal.

“Hey,” I said to the creepy old guy when we walked back to the reception desk. “Has anyone else been to that lockup in the last ten years?”

The old guy was back in his chair, feet up, reading a porno mag. He must have noticed the sickened look I gave him. “I like the stories,” he said, shrugging, his eyes undressing me again. I thought then that all old men like him should be locked away and refused access to the general public.

“That’s not what I asked. Not at *all*.”

“I know what you asked.” He turned his attention to the magazine again. “There was a guy, came here a few times. Never gave a name.”

“What did he look like? You remember?”

“I might.” He smiled at me. “Maybe you give me a look at those nice titties of yours and I tell you.”

Kasey let out a horrified laugh beside me. I’d had enough of the old man’s creepy games. “Hey, how about you tell me what I want to know or I’ll jump over this counter and shove that magazine down your throat.” I stared hard at him, refusing to avert my gaze until he relented, which he soon did. It wasn’t like me to be so aggressive, but the old man was being an asshole and I had too much going on to be tolerant of his bullshit.

The old man’s expression remained passive, like he was used to being reprimanded by young girls, but he put his porno mag down anyway. “You know, that other woman—your mother is it?

She said something similar to me once, threatened to cut my balls off. I believed her.”

“Yeah? Well, you better believe me as well then.”

The old guy shook his head. “Women these days, you’re all ballbusters.”

“Description of the man,” I said losing patience, to the point where I was actually going to leap over there and choke the old bastard with his porno mag as I said I would.

“Six foot, dark hair, no sense of humor, so he must be related to you.” He gave me a childish smirk.

“That’s it?”

“He had a scar on one side of his face,” the creep said. “He was here with your mom once. They looked pretty tight.” He smirked again, seeming to revel in the cutting nature of the information he gave me. “I don’t think it was your daddy, if you know what I mean.”

The decrepit old bastard enjoyed telling me that last part. “You’re sure about that?” I pulled out my wallet and showed him a picture of my dad. “Was it him?”

He squinted at the photo. “Nope, not him.” He squinted again. “Looked very like him though.”

I frowned as I slid the picture back into my wallet. “What do you mean they looked alike?”

“I mean the guy that was here could have been that guy’s relation. Like a brother or something.”

My frown deepened. Neither of my parents had brothers or sisters, or so they told me. My head hurt. This was too much for one night, and I hadn’t even checked out the CD or read the journal yet.

“I think I’ve earned a look at them titties,” the old guy said. “What do you say, eh? A quick flash for an old man?”

I let Kasey give the answer to that one. “Screw you! Creepy old bastard.”

“Dyke bitch!” the old guy shouted as we walked out the doors to the parking lot. Kasey turned around outside and flipped her middle finger at him and then started laughing.

“Crazy old bastard,” she said as she got into the car.

I tossed the journal and disc into the back seat, started the car and drove off. I said hardly anything to Kasey when she started asking me questions about what was going on. I told her I didn’t know, which was true for the most part. I had a million questions in my head, all demanding answers that I wasn’t able to give.

Had my whole childhood been based on a lie? The story was that my mom had been a private detective—that’s what we were told, that’s why she was hardly ever home. Now it turned it out she was into something much more dangerous.

And where was my dad in all this?

That's what I really wanted to know. Did he know about the lockup, about what my mom was into? He had to have known. And who was the stranger my mom was with at the storage facility?

I hoped there'd be answers on that disc and in that journal.

I dropped Kasey off where I first picked her up, at the building in which she slept. She tried to persuade me to stay, to share a bottle of vodka with her, but I politely declined. I had other priorities, which I think she knew anyway. Normally she would have pressed me until I gave in, but on this occasion she let me of the hook first time.

As I wasn't going to be drinking, on the way home I decided I would have a joint instead. So much had happened and my nerves were jangled. The weed would calm me. Josh always kept a stash under the driver's seat. He used to keep it in the glove box until he got pulled over one day by the cops and got busted for possession. Under the drivers seat was a safer place. I spotted an empty parking lot at the back of an old abandoned grocery store of Queen Street. I pulled in and parked the car then slid my hand under the seat in search of the weed. What I found instead was Josh's laptop. He'd obviously stuffed it under the seat in a hurry. Forgetting about the weed I opened the laptop and inserted the disc, my stomach doing somersaults at the prospect of discovering what was on it. Just a quick look and then I would get the car back to Josh.

My pulse quickened as I put the disc in the drive and waited for something to come up on the screen. My heart skipped a beat when a video started playing and I gasped when my mom's face appeared on the screen. My hand went to my mouth and tears welled up in my eyes. She looked just as she did the last time I saw her. Her thick dark brown hair was tied back, revealing her brown, almond shaped eyes, which seemed to fill the screen as they looked out at me. She appeared tired, slightly haggard. It was like looking in a mirror for me. "Hello, Leia," she said on the video in her familiar dusky voice, a voice I hadn't heard in so long. "I guess if you're watching this that means you found the lockup and I'm not around anymore."

The video was dated the day before her death. Tears streamed down my face. "Mom…" I said, touching the screen. I had spent so long resenting her, being angry at her, that I forgot just how much I missed her.

“I’m sorry, baby,” she went on. “I messed up.” Even with the weak video quality I could see her own eyes were shiny with tears, but she held them back. That’s how I remembered her—tough, able to hold back her emotions. I used to think she was cold back then, even uncaring at times.

That didn’t matter at that moment as I became filled with longing, wishing she was there to explain everything in person, to help me understand what was happening to me.

“At some point I’m not going to be around anymore,” she said, her voice strained as she held herself in check. “Something… *someone’s* gonna come for me and that’ll be that. *Shit*…” She paused while she wiped tears from her eyes. “I hope your father is still there with you. I’ll be leaving soon because I know he’ll only get himself killed trying to protect me. Despite everything, he still loves me, though I don’t know why. I’ve made things dangerous for all of us, for you and Josh. No one can be there when they come for me, especially you and Josh… my babies.” Her voice cracked and tears escaped from her eyes, which she quickly wiped away.

I had to pause the video as I sat in the car crying. Seeing my mom again, even if it was only on video, was a little too much to bear after everything else. After a few minutes, when I got control of myself again, I restarted the video. “So I’m spending one more night at home and then I have to go,” my mom said, the sound of her voice unbearably intimate inside the car. And was she in the lockup I had just come from? I recognized the weapons in the background. She was. “Your father doesn’t know. No one does. It’s the way it has to be.” She paused while she lit a cigarette.

Something else I didn’t know about her. “So this is for you, Leia. If Catherine kept her word, you should be eighteen by now. You should be noticing the changes, seeing the demons. You’re probably freaking out right now, but don’t worry, it’s all normal, at least for our kind.”

“Our kind?” I said to the screen.

What did that mean?

“By now you’ve seen the lockup and everything in here. You know I’m not a private detective, right?” She gave a small laugh. “Ridiculous, I know, but it was all I could think to say the day you asked me what I did for a living. I thought it might explain why I was away so much.” Her dark eyes seemed to burn through the screen at me. “I’m sorry

about that, for not being around as much as I should have been. This life we have… it's hard to be a mother. Maybe one day you'll find that out for yourself."

I seriously doubt that.

"Anyway, you probably figured out by now that you aren't normal, not like everyone else anyway. And you aren't. Neither is Josh. You're both Nephilim. As crazy as it sounds, you have angel DNA in your system that activates certain powers when you turn eighteen. Seeing the demons is just the start of it. After that you'll experience a whole host of physical changes…

improvements you might say. You'll get stronger, faster, more agile. You'll develop fighting abilities. You'll even heal quicker. It's kinda cool actually, but you'll also become a soldier in a war that's been raging since humans first walked the earth and that can suck sometimes. Lord knows it can suck…"

I was shaking my head, trying to comprehend what she was saying. She sounded nuts, actually reminding me of the woman from that movie *Terminator 2*, the one who tries to convince everyone that machines will end the world one day. My mom had the same crazy zealousness to her. It wasn't that I didn't believe her. I did, as much as I was able to anyway, but it was a lot to take in. She was practically telling me that my life as I knew it was over. What was I supposed to make of that?

"We're known as Watchers," she continued. "We're here to watch over the humans, to keep them safe, or try to anyway. Doesn't always work out though, as you'll find out one day. More importantly, we're here to watch over the demons and the rest of the evil in this world, to keep it from stepping out of line and breaking the laws of the universe, which unfortunately, is what evil does all the time." She gave a tight smile. "It keeps us busy. Before long you'll be doing nothing else but chasing after those bastards."

So now I'm a Watcher? Suddenly I'm half angel? WTF!

I didn't think things could get any more stranger. I guess that meant art school was out.

"You need to contact someone, a person I should have told you about but didn't, for various reasons that I'm not going to get into now." She looked away from the camera for a second.

“Things happen, that’s all I’m going to say. Anyway, you have an Uncle. His name is Frank.

He’s your father’s brother.”

“What?” All that time growing up in foster homes and I thought we had no one.

“Frank is a Watcher too. He lives in a cabin in the mountains outside the city. You’ll find the directions in the journal I left for you, on the back of his picture. Contact Frank, tell him he owes me. He’ll show you and your brother what to do.”

I grabbed the journal from the back seat and rifled through it, stopping when I found the picture of Frank. The photo was creased and slightly faded and showed a man in his late twenties who was unmistakably my dad’s brother. I could hardly believe I had an uncle. The photo showed Frank leaning against a black car with trees in the background. He had a half smile on his face as he looked at the camera with dark brown eyes that had the same kind of hardness in them that my mom’s had. It must be a Watcher thing—that slightly haunted look that suggested you had seen too many bad things. Frank was handsome like my dad, about the same build though he looked more athletic than my dad did and his dark brown hair was swept back whereas my dad’s had been combed to the side. Looking at the picture I tried to figure what Frank was like as a person, but the picture didn’t give much away. I guessed I’d find out soon enough anyway. There were directions to Frank’s cabin on the back of the picture as my mom had said there would be.

“Anyway, baby, I have to go now,” my mom said in the video and I thought: *As usual, huh?*

“I’m really sorry for all this, sorry if I messed up your life. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me one day. I… I always tried to do what was right, baby. Sometimes it just didn’t work out.” Her brown eyes went glassy again. “I love you, Leia. Look after your brother and tell him I love him. Tell your father, I love him too. Goodbye.”

The screen went black as my mom switched off the camera.

Tell my father, she loves him?

I shook my head, tears rolling down my face. In a sudden surge of anger I slammed my fist into the dashboard and let out a frustrated scream. If only she had known when she made that video what would

happen the next day.

My mind reeled. I didn't know what to think or how to feel. My life had been turned upside down, like I was free falling with no way of stopping myself. What the hell was a girl to do when her dead mother drops a bombshell like that?

There was only one thing to do as far as I was concerned: get drunk. I hadn't drunk in nearly a year because I was trying to be good, trying to be straight, to be normal. What a waste of time that had been, especially when I found out I was anything *but* normal.

I pulled out my phone and called Josh. He would be pissed that I still had the car. His phone rang but there was no answer, which meant he really was pissed. He tended to block me anytime we argued or I pissed him off. I sent him a text apologizing, telling him I would be home with the car soon, albeit an hour and a half late.

I put the laptop and journal on the passenger seat and drove home, all the while wondering how I was going to tell Josh about everything and how he would react.

Whatever happened, it looked like our lives were about to change forever.

Chapter 5

By the time I arrived back at Diane's place, I'd called Josh three more times on his cell and every time the call went to voicemail.

What the hell, Josh? Get a grip, no need to be an asshole about things.

I parked the car and took the laptop and journal up to the house with me.

Josh and Diane were nowhere to be seen and there was an eerie silence in the house. The TV, normally blaring in the background, was switched off. I expected Josh to be standing there waiting for me when I came in, ready to chew me out for being late and messing up his plans.

"Josh!" I called out. "Diane! I'm home! Hello…"

No one answered.

Frowning, I put the laptop and journal on the sofa. Then I noticed the strange smell. It was sharp and pungent and reminded me of something I had smelled once in chemistry class back in high school. It was sulfur. Why would the house smell of sulfur? "Josh, I'm home. Car's outside."

Still nothing.

Where the hell is everyone?

There was no one in the kitchen so I went upstairs, noticed the bathroom door was slightly open, that there were large wet footprints imprinted on the carpet that led towards Josh's room.

Why all the water? Not like Diane to be so messy.

"Diane, you in there?" I said as I pushed the bathroom door open.

I screamed when I saw Diane in the tub. The water was red and her neck was twisted around at an impossible angle, her tongue poking out the side of her mouth like it had tried to escape. Her eyes were frozen open. I ran to the bath tub. "No, no, no… Diane…"

She was dead.

Someone had broken her neck and stabbed her in the belly.

My chest heaved as I tried to control my emotions.

This can't be happening. Diane can't be dead.

But she *was* dead, as dead as I've ever seen anybody.

Who would do this?

I turned around and there was something written on the mirror. It was scrawled in blood it looked like: JOSH WITH US NOW. YOU WILL BE SOON AS WELL.

Underneath the text there was a smiley face, also drawn in blood.

What the hell did that mean?

"Josh!"

I ran out of the bathroom and into Josh's room. He wasn't there, not that I expected him to be.

Whoever or whatever had killed Diane had also taken Josh.

But why? Who would want to kidnap my brother and why do they want me as well?

I was shaking, breathing hard as I glanced around Josh's room. It was a mess, like someone had trashed the place. It looked like he had put up a fight against whoever had taken him. The widescreen TV had been ripped off the wall and lay smashed on the floor. The shelves that held all his trophies that he won fighting were also broken off the wall, the trophies snapped and smashed on the floor. Even the curtains had somehow been torn from the railing and lay

scrunched on the broken bed. Josh was tough, strong, he knew how to fight. Obviously he hadn't been easy to restrain.

At least he was still alive.

Or at least I hoped he was.

Taking out my phone, I rang Josh's number again, thinking that maybe whoever had taken him would answer and tell me what they wanted, tell me what I had to do to get my brother back.

The phone dropped from my ear when I heard Josh's ringtone coming from close by. I looked around for a second and saw his phone lying on the floor. "Fuck!" I screamed.

What was I supposed to do now?

Think, Leia, think. Call the cops.

I dialed 911 and an operator answered, but just as they did, I hung up the phone. Something told me the cops wouldn't be able to help me. It was Diane's neck that made me hang up, the

impossible angle her head was twisted. I didn't think an ordinary person could do such a thing.

Whatever was going on, it had something to do with the whole business of Josh and me being

"Watcher's" as my mom had called us, even though Josh didn't know anything about that stuff yet. This was demons or some other monster.

What if they're still here in the house?

It was an ice cold thought that nearly made my heart jump out of my chest. I still hadn't checked my room or Diane's. Someone or something could be in there, waiting for me.

Oh fuck. Surely they would have grabbed me by now if they were still there?

I was starting to wish I had a weapon on me, maybe one of those swords from my mom's lockup.

Now I knew why she needed all that stuff.

I might as well have been naked, so vulnerable did I feel, but somewhere deep inside of me something stirred. At first I thought it was just a side effect of the fear and panic until it started to spread throughout my whole body; a warm feeling that brought with it a strange sense of calm. I was still terrified, defenseless and alone, but physically it was like I didn't give a shit, like I was ready for anything.

Was this the angel part of me coming to the forefront to protect me?

Right then I hoped so as I walked out of Josh's room and across the hall were against my better judgment, I pulled down the handle on my bedroom door and let it swing open, readying myself in case there was

anyone or anything in there. On edge, I stood in the doorway as I got flashbacks of the night the demon took my mom and killed my dad; me as a seven-year-old kid pushing open the door to my parent's bedroom…

The room was empty. No one was there.

I relaxed slightly and allowed myself to take a breath before crossing the hall to Diane's room.

The door was half open. Same as before, I pushed the door all the way open, my heart beating loudly in my chest, and waited for something to reveal itself but there was nothing.

I dropped my shoulders and allowed myself to relax, but not much. It seemed the house was empty. I hunkered down, my back against the landing wall as I tried to think. Josh was gone.

Diane was dead. What was I supposed to do now? Then I remembered the writing on the

bathroom mirror. *You will be soon.* In other words, I was next. Whoever had taken Josh would be coming for me as well.

"I have to get out of here," I said to myself as I stood up. Diane's body was still in the bathtub. I didn't feel right about just leaving her there like that so I called the cops and told them I wanted to report a murder, giving the address and hanging up before they could ask my name.

I cried as I went downstairs on the verge of a nervous breakdown. How could so much happen in one day? I was shattered, the person I once was blown to pieces by the force of events.

I have to keep it together. I have to get Josh back.

That was the only thing on my mind, finding out who took Josh and getting him back. They didn't kill him, whoever "they" were—I didn't think so anyway, which meant they wanted

something. Kidnappers always wanted something. I just had to find out what.

I left Diane's house before the cops arrived. I didn't even think to take clothes or anything else from my room; I just grabbed the laptop and my mom's journal from the living room. Before walking out the door,

I looked back through blurry eyes. My life had been going so well. I had been happy for the first time ever, contented. All that had been wiped out in a single day.

I was still crying as I left the house and got into my brother's Mustang. There was only one person who could help me now.

Uncle Frank.

Chapter 6

I don't think I stopped crying until I got outside city limits. I almost pulled up at the building where Kasey lived so I could ask her to come along with me for moral support; I needed to tell someone who cared about what was going on. I actually slowed outside the building, but I shook my head and sped off. I couldn't drag Kasey into all that. Diane had been murdered. Josh had been kidnapped. I couldn't risk the life of the only other person in the world I cared about. I had never felt so alone in my life as when I drove away from Kasey's place, towards the home of a man I had never even met. Uncle or not, he was still a stranger and I didn't like the fact that I was being forced to put my trust in someone I didn't know. I learned a long time ago that trusting strangers was dangerous, and it was going against my every instinct seeking that man out.

Following the directions my mom had written on the back of the photograph, I eventually came upon a turn-off in the main road that took me up a steep mountainside and through a thick forest where my uncle apparently lived. My lips pressed tightly together and my stomach roiling, I drove up the narrow dirt road. There was a sour taste in my mouth as I wondered what I was going to find at the end of that road.

What if this guy is a total psycho? He hunts monsters for a living, he's hardly going to be warm and caring.

The night seemed to become darker the further up the mountain I drove. I could make out next to nothing of my surroundings and I kept wondering why someone would choose to live all the way up there, miles from nowhere, isolated and alone. My dread soon gave way to full-blown anguish after the dirt road finally ended and I came upon a cabin built on a flat clearing surrounded by trees.

This was it. Uncle Frank's place.

A man I had never met, who had never even checked in on me or Josh the whole time we were growing up, the whole time we were in the foster system, despite the fact that he obviously knew we had no one.

What kind of uncle does that?

As I slowed the car outside the cabin, I had visions of this Frank character telling me to turn around and drive back the way I came, to

leave him alone and not bother him ever again. Then I'd be truly alone, with no one to help me. Not a good prospect to be thinking about, so I forced it out of my mind and pulled myself into the present.

I climbed out of the car, taking the laptop and journal with me. Unlike in the city, night was really night up the mountain. The only light came from the moon high above in the star speckled black sky. The blanket of silence that surrounded the place I found disconcerting to say the least.

My stomach fluttered and my heart beat irregularly as I stood by the car and looked over at the wood cabin. It was quite small but looked foreboding in the darkness. It had windows on either side with a front door in the middle. No lights were on, even though there was a car parked out front. I hoped I hadn't come all this way only to find no one home.

Then I heard a deep growling noise. I looked to the left and saw a big black dog edging its way towards me, baring its teeth. It was a Labrador, a breed of dog that I always considered cute and friendly. Not this one it seemed. I jumped when it barked at me. "Good dog," I said in a shaky voice, readying myself to jump back in the car if it got any closer.

As I stood half frozen trying not to make too much eye contact with the snarling dog, I heard a clicking sound right behind me and then a man's voice. "Nice car you have there."

I slowly turned around to find a gun pointed at me. The barrel looked huge in front of my face.

"Frank?" I asked, raising my arms slightly.

"Who wants to know?"

"My name's Leia Swanson. My mother said you're my Uncle. I need your help."

The gun was lowered after a moment and I relaxed, though not much. The man who I assumed was Frank took a step forward, his dark eyes checking me out. He certainly looked like the man in the picture, though obviously older and more worn down. Something about him also put me on edge and it wasn't just the fact that he held a gun. I got the impression he was dangerous enough, even without a weapon. "You look like her alright. What are you doing here?" His voice was

gravelly. I thought I could smell whiskey on his breath. Was the relatively fresh-faced young man from the photo now a bitter drunk? I hoped not. The scar on one side of his face didn't help put me at ease either. I expected him to have aged, and he had. His hair was grayer; he had more lines in his face. It wasn't just the aging that made him seem different to the man in the picture though. The younger Frank in the photo had a light in his eyes, like he still had much to live for.

The man in front of me had no such light in his dark bloodshot eyes. The man in front of me gave off the impression that he was thoroughly tired of life at this point.

"I told you," I said. "I need your help. My brother has been taken."

"Taken?"

"Kidnapped. Whatever. He's gone and I need your help to get him back. My mom said you

would help me. She told me to come here, said you owed her."

His eyes narrowed and he cocked his head to one side. "Really? When exactly? She's been gone for eleven years."

"I know it sounds crazy, and I know my mom is practically dead, but she left me this video along with her journal and in the video she told me to come find you up here, that you could help me—

help both of us actually—my brother and me—but I got home earlier and my brother was gone and my foster mother was dead—murdered in the bath and there was a message written in blood on the bathroom mirror and it said…it said they were coming for me as well and—"

"Okay, okay. Hold on." He didn't seem amused that a crazy-ass girl—niece or not—had landed at his doorstep unannounced, so I was surprised when he said, "Come inside." I wasn't sure about Frank or if I should be trusting him, but I followed him into the cabin, not having much of a choice.

The dog was still eyeing me suspiciously from outside as I went through the door. "Your dog doesn't like me," I said to Frank.

"You're a stranger to him. Don't take it personally." He held the front door open. "Bane. In."

The Labrador dropped his ears and seemed to relax as it walked

passed Frank and into the cabin, paying me no more attention as it went and slumped under the living room window, its guard duty done for the night.

Frank switched on the light—a single bare bulb that hung from the living room ceiling—and beckoned for me to take a seat. I paused for a second, taking in the interior of the cabin. It was pretty basic. No pictures on the walls except for a stuffed trout mounted over the fireplace, nothing that suggested anything about Frank's personality. The place smelled earthy, all natural scents of cooking, whiskey, dog and a few other odors I couldn't quite place. There were certainly no signs of the pungent air-fresheners that Diane often used in her home. It felt like I was the first woman to ever set foot in the place. Two armchairs sat in front of the fireplace. One chair looked threaded and well worn, the other like new. I sat in the less worn armchair by the open fire that was crackling away, filling the cabin with a warmth that was a stark contrast to the cold outside.

The heat and the comforting glow of the fire made me feel instantly more at ease. Real fires have always had that effect on me, though I was still twitchy as I watched Frank walk into the tiny adjoining kitchen and fill two glasses with whisky from a bottle that was almost empty. He looked disheveled in a creased blue shirt that hung over faded dark jeans. Again, I got the impression Frank didn't get many visitors. He carried the two glasses over to where I was sitting, silently handed me one, and sat down in the chair opposite me. "Can I see that?" He was pointing to my mother's journal.

I hesitated before I handed him the journal. There was a deep frown on his face as he turned the pages. I regarded him carefully as I sipped at the whiskey. I was more of a vodka girl, but the whiskey would do. It warmed my insides and took the edge off my nerves.

"You read any of this yet?" Frank asked, still carefully turning the pages in the journal.

I shook my head. "Not yet. I only got it a few hours ago from the lockup."

He seemed surprised. "You found the lockup?"

"My Mom left instructions before she…" I trailed off. How much did he know about what

happened to my mom and dad? Did he know about the demon who took my mom or did he think what everyone else thought, that she

was just gone?

He handed me back the book and then sat staring at me like he was trying to work out what to make of me and my situation. “What?” I asked when I couldn’t take his gaze anymore.

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“I guess me coming here is the last thing you expected. I wouldn’t have come if I had other options.”

He nodded and carried on drinking his whiskey, allowing silence to descend once more. Clearly he was used to silence living up there alone, was comfortable in it even. He stared into the fire for a moment before leaning over and lifting a log from the side of the fireplace. He threw the log on the fire and the flames leapt higher for a few seconds before settling back down again.

Seeing him in real life, I was once again shocked by how much he looked like my dad. He had the same dark hair, although it was slightly longer than my dad’s ever was, and more unkempt.

Frank’s hair also had streaks of gray. No doubt if my dad was alive his hair would be gray as well. Frank’s eyes were also the same nut brown color as my dad’s, although Frank’s eyes had a hint of the color of the whiskey in his glass.

That’s where the similarities between him and my dad ended. Whereas my dad’s eyes had been soft and caring most of the time, Frank had a hard look in his, like he had seen too much bad stuff that had left him cold, jaded, and detached from everything. His face was more drawn than my dad’s had been, his mouth harder. I doubted he was as quick to smile as my dad had been. He seemed put out by my presence, like I was stirring up memories and emotions in him that he didn’t want disturbed.

“Look, I can go if you don’t want me here,” I said, sliding forward in my chair to get up.

He put out a hand. “Wait. Just… sit. It’s fine.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

“You want another drink?” He got up and took my empty glass before I got a chance to answer. I frowned at him as he went to the kitchen and refilled the glasses. I sort of got the impression that Frank liked

his whiskey.

Was that why he was behaving so strangely though?

He handed me my glass and sat back down.

“This is obviously weird for you,” I said.

Frank was rubbing the stubble on his chin with one hand. “Yeah. It’s a little weird, I have to say.”

“Why?”

“Well, for one thing you look exactly like your mom did at your age.”

“Okay.” What did he want me to do about that? “And?”

“And… you’re here. What is it you want from me?”

“I thought I was pretty clear on that outside. My brother’s been kidnapped and my mom left me instructions to come see you in the hope that you would maybe help me. Obviously she was wrong.” I placed the whiskey glass on the floor and stood up. “Sorry to bother you.” I fought back tears as I walked to the front door. The dog sat up, looking at me.

“Wait,” Frank said, standing.

I could see the guilt in his eyes when he noticed I was crying. “Look, I know I’m just a stranger to you, but you have to help me here. I’ve nowhere else to go. All this bad stuff is happening and I don’t know how to handle it…” He came over and I thought for one horrible second he was going to put his arms around me, but he just stood there awkwardly, not really knowing how to deal with my emotion. Maybe he wasn’t used to human contact, or at least not used to emotional eighteen-year-old girls.

“Come sit back down,” he said. He walked me back to the chair and then sat down himself.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sniffing and wiping away tears. “A lot has happened today.”

“You mentioned a video your mom made for you.”

“Yes, it’s on the laptop. You wanna see it?”

His eyes widened for a second and then he swallowed. “No. Later, maybe.” He downed the rest of his whiskey. “What did your Mom tell you in this video?”

I told him everything my mom had said in the video, about how she was supposed to leave to protect us, about Josh and me being Watchers and everything that entailed. “Do you know what happened to her?” I asked. “Did a demon take her?”

Frank shifted in his seat. “What makes you say that?”

“I saw something take her that night, this horrible demon figure. It had her in its arms as it jumped into this orange circle of light on the floor and they just… disappeared. Then there was the huge dog beast that… killed my dad. No one believed me about that. They all said I was crazy from grief or some shit.”

“You weren’t crazy. She was taken.” He looked extremely uncomfortable talking about my mom and I wasn’t sure why until I remembered what she had said in the video, that my father still loved her despite everything.

“Did you have something to do with my mom’s death?”

The question seemed to catch him off guard. “I… no. That was all her doing, her choice.”

“What do you mean?”

He seemed to think for a second, like there was some internal battle going on and he didn’t know how to handle it. Then he visibly relaxed, like he just didn’t care anymore. He looked defeated by whatever emotional struggle he was going through. “You’ve obviously had a rough day. Why don’t you stay here tonight? Get some sleep and we’ll talk again in the morning. Maybe we can figure out why your brother was taken.”

Not really the response I was looking for. He didn’t seem willing to talk about my mom so I tried a different subject. “Did demons take my brother?”

“I don’t know. I’d have to look into the whole thing first. Don’t jump to conclusions just yet.”

He stood up. “Come on, I’ll show you where your room is.”

He was giving me the brush off. I considered calling him out on it, but I didn't. I couldn't risk annoying or upsetting him in case he tossed me out. He was the only one who could help me get my brother back. I needed him. So I followed him out of the living room, taking the laptop and journal with me to a small bedroom that had a single bed, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers with a mirror on top, resting against the wall. Not exactly *MTV Cribs* but it would do. I'd stayed in worse over the years. He said goodnight and then he was gone, closing the door behind him.

I stood looking around the room for a second, barely taking in my new surroundings before sitting down on the creaky bed and looking out the window at the nearly full moon in the night sky. The moon looked so much more vivid up here than it did from the city. It was beautiful, but it did nothing to lift my mood. I felt weirdly disconnected from everything, the way I used to feel when I took in a new foster home for the first time. It was like I was living in some kind of dream world, only it wasn't a dream, but a nightmare that I couldn't seem to wake up from.

I wasn't sure I could even sleep knowing my brother was out there alone, being held captive by who the hell knew what. I was acutely aware time mattered when it came to kidnappings. I'd seen enough movies to know that the longer a person spent in captivity the less chance they had of being released or found, and if they were, they always came out damaged, physically, mentally, or both. I shut my eyes tightly when I felt like I was going to cry again. Crying wouldn't help get Josh back. Only Frank could help me with that.

I lay back on the bed and opened my mom's journal. It seemed to be a record of her job as a Watcher right from the first time she went out on the hunt when she was my age. The first page told of her and her father—my grandfather—whom I'd only met once before he died, when I was very young, so I barely remembered him except that he seemed nice, just a little scary.

The journal described my mom and grandfather hunting this demon called Zycklon. They

tracked it to an abandoned school building in Mercy City. My mom killed it with a knife, some demon-killing knife her father had given her. It was her first kill. "*I had never been so afraid,"*

she wrote. *"I thought the demon would kill me, but I managed to stab it with the knife while Dad watched. Afterwards, I felt righteous, like I had*

made the world a better place. Dad was proud.

This is what I want to do with my life, to be a Watcher and make the world safe from evil."

On the same page there was a detailed sketch of the demon she had killed. It looked exactly like some of the demon faces I had sketched myself over the previous months. The demon had flaps of skin sticking out of both sides of its face like bat wings almost, translucent and patterned with thin blood vessels. The eyes were large and full of fierceness. I was quite taken aback by my mom's artistic skills. I always wondered where I got my drawing talent. Growing up, I had never seen my mom draw anything. Now, looking through her journal I could see she was more of an accomplished artist than even me. Her skill with a pencil was amazing. Not only did she capture the look of the demons perfectly, she also managed to convey the nature of the real monster underneath. That took real skill.

I read through more of the journal, taking in details of the many hunts my mom went on. It seemed like that was all she did—hunt monsters of every type and description. She loved it. That much was obvious by the way she wrote. She embraced the whole Watcher life like a calling, which I supposed it was. I mean, who would willingly spend their life putting themselves in deep jeopardy while chasing evil unless it was something they felt they had no choice in?

I wondered if I would end up the same way, if I would embrace the life the way my mom did. I'd only just discovered this hidden world, so it was too early to say. Maybe if Josh hadn't been taken, we could have helped each other understand what we were apparently fated for.

But Josh wasn't around, so my main priority was finding him. I would do what I had to do, learn what I had to learn to get him back safely.

The rest would have to wait.

Chapter 7

The next morning it took me a minute to figure out where I was before I realized I was in my Uncle Frank's cabin half way up a mountain. I hardly slept at all the night before. I thought about Josh, where he might be, who he might be with, what kind of torture he was being subjected to.

Most of all I wondered if I was ever going to see him again. I quietly cried myself to sleep, where I eventually ended up having nightmares involving my mom and the demon who took her, massive hell beasts chasing me around the old house.

When I got up I could see no sign of Frank, so I went outside and found him out front in a grassy clearing by the edge of the trees. He stood in the cold morning air, topless, in a pair of faded jeans, hitting a punching bag that hung from one of the trees. I watched from the front door for a moment, my arms folded across my chest as I got used to the chilly air. I put Frank in his early forties, though with his wiry, muscular body and the way he expertly moved around the

punching bag—hitting it sometimes with shocking speed and power, the bag swinging wildly on the tree branch it was tethered to—he seemed a lot younger.

One thing I hadn't noticed last night was the view. It was breathtaking. Beyond the pine trees that ran right down the mountainside, I could see almost the whole of Mercy City in all its grimy glory, sprawled out with the two rivers running through it. I would have called it picturesque if I didn't know any better, but I knew the city too well to get misty eyed over it.

Bane, the black Labrador, was sniffing around not far from Frank. The dog barked when he saw me, causing Frank to look my way. "Morning," he said. I walked over to him, noticing a thick scar to the left of his spine, just below his shoulder blade. An old war wound, no doubt.

"You do this every morning?" I asked, standing a few feet away from him.

"Mostly." He gave a small shrug. "Depends how much whiskey I drank the night before."

I nodded.

“You train?”

“Train?” I wanted to laugh. If he only knew how much I resisted my brother’s repeated attempts to get me to join the gym. However, Frank’s seriousness in asking made any kind of mocking seem somehow inappropriate. “No, not really.”

“That’ll have to change.” He punched the bag again, sending it swinging away from him.

“You’re gonna have to learn to use your abilities, and to do that, you have to train—a lot.”

I can’t say I liked the sound of that. Not at all. I also hoped Frank wasn’t going to get me to hit his punching bag in some lame effort to see what “skills” I had. I hadn’t long woken up and I needed coffee to function properly in the morning. It used to be that I needed pills to get me going, but that didn’t end well. Coffee did the job a lot more safely.

“Hit the bag.” He stepped away from the punching bag like he was giving me the floor or something. I felt the weight of his judgment and I hadn’t even thrown a punch yet.

“I don’t think so.” I folded my arms tighter around myself. “Seriously, I’m barely awake.”

He nodded and took a couple of steps towards me. I was slightly intimidated by the fact that he was topless. I tried not to look at the scars on his naked torso as he spoke. “You came to me for help, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, this is me helping you. You haven’t a chance in hell of getting your brother back without knowing how to protect yourself. The world you just stepped into, it’s about as heavy as it gets.

If you can’t protect yourself, you’ll get killed. It’s that simple.” He took a few steps back again.

“Now hit the bag.”

I kind of felt like he had just thrown a bucket of cold water over me. I

couldn't argue with his logic. If I wanted to survive a world where demons and monsters roamed free to kill when they felt like it—to break the necks of innocent foster parents who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—I would have to toughen up. Josh would be much amused by the irony.

If he were here.

Alright, here we go.

I stepped towards the bag, assumed a loose fighting stance, the way Josh had tried to teach me in the past—one leg slightly forward, hands up in loose fists. I felt stiff and awkward under Frank's gaze, but I threw a jab anyway, my fist stinging as it impacted with the surprisingly hard leather of the punching bag, which barely moved. I felt stupid and embarrassed by my woeful lack of skill.

"Hit off the back hand," Frank said, Bane by his side now, watching on in amusement. Now I had a full audience. "Try to get your body weight behind the punch."

I resisted sighing and faced the bag again, preparing for failure once more. I hit the bag with a right cross and again, it barely moved.

Where was the super-strength that allowed me to kick a door in yesterday?

I blamed it on not being a morning person and hoped demons didn't like to fight before ten a.m.

If they did, I was screwed.

"Use your hips to put your body weight into the strike. Hit it again and focus this time."

Suddenly Frank is Mr. Miyagi now?

I hit the bag again, mild anger fuelling my actions this time. The punch felt more solid so I hit the bag again, throwing my hips forward and allowing my upper body to lean into the strike, slamming my fist into the hard leather. The bag jolted away from me. Without thinking I stepped aside as it came swinging back and I laid a left hook into it, hitting it hard enough to send it swinging in a different direction. I stepped back, shocked by my sudden competence, but also strangely pleased.

Something clicked then, like I suddenly got why Josh loved to train

and hit things so much. It was a kind of release I had never experienced before, not through drugs or sex or even art. I suddenly felt more alive than I had ever been, like part of me had been asleep and was now awake. Who knew throwing a few punches could be such a revelation?

"Nice," Frank said, mildly impressed. "Everything you need is already inside you. You're Nephilim. The skill is hardcoded in your DNA—you just need to coax it out."

My hand throbbed from hitting the hard leather. "I'll keep that in mind. In the meantime, I need a coffee, if you don't mind."

"Sure, come on." We walked towards the cabin and he stopped by Josh's car. "1969 Mustang. I used to have one of these. Great car until a Wendigo tore it apart on me."

A Wendigo?

"My brother likes his classic cars." I pointed to Frank's car. "'67 Chevy, right?"

Frank nodded approvingly. "You know your cars."

"Not really. My brother does, though. I guess it runs in the family."

He gave a slight smile. "I guess so."

Back in the cabin, Frank put on a shirt and made coffee. We sat in the kitchen at a tiny breakfast bar. "I made some calls last night," he said. "Digging into your brother's abduction."

I perked up. "And?"

"Well, the only thing I got was that your brother is apparently not the only one who has gone missing. Nephilim kids all over the country have been disappearing over the last six months and no one seems to know why. It's very strange. Demons are most likely behind it, they always are."

My heart felt heavy in my chest. "I can't believe this is happening again."

Frank frowned. "What's happening again?"

"A demon took my mother, now one has taken my brother."

Frank looked away, drank his coffee.

“You wanna tell me what happened with my mom?”

His discomfort returned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, why was she taken? She never mentioned why on the video she left me.”

“You really want to know?” He didn’t look like he wanted to tell me, but I was leaving him no choice.

“Yes.”

His flushed face looked pained. “She sold her soul, that’s the long and the short of it.”

He might as well have thrown his coffee in my face. “Sold her *soul*? What the hell for? Can you even do that?”

“You can do it alright.” He got up and washed out his cup, then stood leaning against the sink with his arms folded.

“But why?” He didn’t want to tell me for some reason. I didn’t care, I had to know. “Why, Frank?”

“To save me, alright?” He stared at me as if waiting for my reaction and when I didn’t say anything he spoke again. “Your mom sold her soul to bring me back from the dead.” He

shrugged. “Now you know.”

I took a deep breath while I tried to make sense of what he just told me.

This shit just keeps getting better.

“Why would she sacrifice herself like that to save *you*? It doesn’t make sense.”

Frank pressed his lips tightly together as he stared hard at the floor. I thought he looked guilty of something. “It’s complicated,” was all he said.

“Complicated? Explain it to me.” I tensed up as my anger mounted.

“You really want to do this now?”

A deep scowl settled on my face. “I need to know.”

Frank took a deep breath before speaking. I listened, my lips tightly pursed. “Rachel—your mom—was out hunting a pack of demons who’d been causing havoc in Mercy City for a while.

The demons were on a killing spree, murdering anyone who crossed their path.” I was about to ask why the demons were killing people, but Frank raised his eyebrows at me and shook his head like he knew what I was going to say. “Don’t ask why. Some of them are just like that.” He paused for a second while he seemed to get lost in the memories. “So Rachel tracked them down and she went on her own to kill them, no backup, which was stupid because I was always telling her about taking backup. But your mom was stubborn as hell at times, thought she could handle everything on her own.” He paused again to shake his head. “Anyway, she calls me, say’s she’s in trouble, that she’s pinned down by these demons in this old building, so I go to help her and we kill them all, or so we thought. One of them was hiding, jumped out and knifed me in the back.”

That would explain the scar.

“So then what happened?” I asked.

Frank shrugged. “I died. Then I remember coming back, like waking up from sleep. Your mom didn’t tell me at first what she’d done, told me I’d been unconscious for a while, but I knew something was wrong, so I didn’t quit until I got it out of her.” He shook his head again like he was still trying to fathom my mom’s behavior back then. “She made a deal with a crossroads demon—her soul for my resurrection.”

“That still doesn’t make sense to me,” I said. “Why would she trade her life for yours?”

“I don’t know.” He took a glass from one of the cupboards and poured himself a whiskey.

“Seriously? At this time of the morning?”

Frank shrugged, said nothing.

Great. The man’s a drunk.

“I think you’re full of shit, Frank.” I stood up from the breakfast bar to confront him. “There’s stuff you’re not telling me.”

“I told you everything,” he said, moving past me into the living room, taking the whiskey bottle with him. He sat down in one of the armchairs and poured himself another glass.

I stood staring at him, heat flushing through my body, my fists curling and uncurling. “Screw this,” I said finally. “This was a bad idea, coming here.” I stormed past him to the bedroom where I retrieved the laptop and journal and headed for the door.

“Where you going?” he called. “Wait!” I was out the door, heading to the car when he came out after me. “What about your brother?”

“I’ll find him myself,” I said, opening the car door and throwing the laptop and journal into the back seat. “Maybe I’ll sell my soul to get him back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He was holding the door open. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

“So you trade your soul to bring me back. Makes about as much sense as my mom trading hers for you, doesn’t it?” I pulled the door from his grip and slammed it closed, started the engine and backed out.

“Wait!” Frank was shouting as I turned the car and started driving down the mountain road. I sped off and didn’t look back.

When I got to the city, I considered that maybe I had been a little hard on Frank, but I was just so sick of the secrets. My whole life had been a lie up until that point. There I was, trying to be this ordinary girl when all along I was destined for a life that was far from ordinary, a life that would probably do me more harm than good if my mom and Frank were anything to go by, not to

mention Josh. I knew Frank wasn’t telling me everything, that he was hiding something. I expected him to be open with me, considering who I was, but no, I was wrong about that.

I couldn’t help it. I ended up driving by Diane’s house, saw the police had cordoned off the house, the forensics van and cop cars parked outside. What were they thinking happened? That I killed my foster mother? That Josh did? What would they make of the writing on the mirror?

Cover-up maybe? I wanted to go in the house, look around again for clues, but I knew if I did I’d be arrested on the spot and taken in for

questioning. It was a situation I'd have difficulty explaining. The cops would think I was crazy and then they would look into my background, see the statement I gave when I was seven, then they would definitely think I was nuts. They would throw me in a psych ward somewhere and I'd never get Josh back. I drove away from the house.

I would have to be careful. No doubt the cops would be looking for me, probably have APB's or something out for me and Josh both. I continued to drive nowhere in particular, just moving through the city streets, looking out the window, searching for Josh. Ridiculous, I know, but I was half-hoping to see him walking the streets, completely fine like nothing had happened.

Instead, what I saw were more demon faces, but in a new light. I knew exactly what they were now and I kept wondering if any of them had something to do with Diane's murder or Josh's abduction. Some of the demons stared back at me, like they knew what I was; which was more than I could say for myself.

It was for that reason that I found myself driving towards the storage facility where I'd been the day before with Kasey. The creepy old guy was there behind the reception counter, leering at me.

"Back to show me those titties, I hope," he said.

"Go fuck yourself, old man," I said and strode right past him, heading down the corridor to my mom's lockup. When I got there I opened the shutter, turned on the light, and pulled the shutter back down again. I started to look around, more carefully than I did the first time now that I was alone.

Anything to do with her 'job,' my mom seemed to keep in that place. It was understandable that she didn't store any of it in the house, lest one of her children stumble across it. Not only that, the cops and the media would have had a field day if they'd found all this stuff at the house eleven years ago. Mom would have been branded a Satanist or Occultist as well as a potential murderer.

I looked at the weapons on the back wall first. I counted about eight different guns, none of which I knew anything about. The larger ones seemed like automatic weapons, military grade probably. Who the hell knew where she got those from? The smaller guns were handguns, two semi-automatic and one large chrome six-shooter that looked like a damned hand cannon. I picked it up and gasped at the weight of it. I

thought if I fired the thing I would go flying back because of the massive recoil.

What I was most interested in were the swords and knives. Something about the gleaming blades drew me to them. There were two swords in particular attached to the wall, crossing one another, with blades of about three feet in length, slightly smaller than a normal Katana—which I only knew because Josh owned a Japanese Katana. I took the two swords off the wall and started playing around with them, feeling their weight, swinging them around. Even though I hadn't much of a clue as to how to use them, the two swords felt good in my hands, almost like they belonged there. I remembered what Frank and my mom had said, that ingrained fighting ability was a part of the Watcher awakening process. My fighting ability didn't seem to have manifested just yet. I put the swords down on the bench that ran along the wall.

There were two other swords there that I tried out, both longer and broader and heavier, but they didn't feel as good as the two smaller ones. I put them back and checked out the knives; I was drawn to one of them immediately. The handle seemed like it was made from bone—not human I hoped—with symbols carved into it. The deadly looking blade was serrated on one side and more symbols were carved into the steel. As I held the blade, I wondered how many monsters and demons my mom had killed with it. A lot, I guessed, if her journal was anything to go by.

My mom was a regular killing machine in her day.

Was that to be my future as well? Spending my life spilling the blood of monsters? At that moment I couldn't see it, but time would tell. If it meant getting Josh back, I would spill as much demon blood as I had to, no questions asked.

Besides the weapons, there were all the glass jars and bottles containing some really weird stuff, like strange plants, slivers of bone, things preserved in formaldehyde that I could only guess at. I figured all that stuff was used for spells. I had similar items back in Diane's house, stuff I'd bought from back alley occult stores when I was dabbling in witchcraft, trying to summon demons so I could ask them about my parents. None of my spells worked, probably because the spells I was working on weren't even real, nor the ingredients I bought for them. I figured the stuff my mom had collected was as real as it got. She mentioned a few times in her journal about doing spells. I would have to look into that further.

I started by looking through some of the books that were scattered about the room. Old books, musty smelling, covered in dust were they hadn't been disturbed in over a decade. Many of the books were written in a different language—maybe Latin—I wasn't sure. In the texts written in English, I read about various demons and how to summon them, about exorcism spells,

banishing spells, tracking spells and all sorts of others, along with lists of ingredients for each one.

Also in the lockup was a small locker like the ones we had in high school. It wasn't locked so I opened it up and found about half a dozen different outfits hanging in there, nearly all black—

leather pants with a short leather jacket, some dark jeans with more jackets, and another pair of leather pants with a leather body armor thing as well. "Jeez, Mom, dress up much…" I

remembered her as always being dressed like a soccer mom: in jogging suits and casual clothes, but never in anything like the outfits I was looking at. I pulled out a black pantsuit with a white blouse, searched the pockets and found some kind of ID wallet. It was an FBI badge with my mom's picture on it, under the name 'Special Agent Stephanie Green.' "Holy shit…" I stood shaking my head. So my mom went around impersonating an FBI agent as well.

Why, though? To get onto crime scenes maybe? To investigate people in their homes?

I hung the pantsuit back up.

At the bottom of the locker there was a small metal box, like a cash box. I took it out and brought it to the bench. Inside I found a passport which wasn't in my mom's name but had her picture on it, as well as various ID's, all with her picture but under different names. They stated she was a health inspector, an IRS employee, a doctor at Mercy City General and the best one, a CIA agent. "What the hell, Mom?" I shook my head and looked into the box again. There was cash. A lot of cash. Maybe ten thousand dollars or more. I was astounded. My mom had this whole other life and I never even had a clue. When was she planning on filling me and Josh in about it all?

There were two photographs in the box, one of me and Josh, taken behind the house when we were about five years old, just two happy little kids with not a care in the world. The other picture was of my mom and dad. It was one of those photo booth pictures, the two of

them squashing their heads together, laughing, young and happy and in love. A lump formed in my throat as I stared at the picture. Looking at them, no one would ever guess what horrible things their futures held or what secrets they were hiding behind their smiles.

I still didn't know the extent of my dad's involvement in the whole Watcher thing. He was around pretty much all the time when we were growing up. He practically raised us by himself with my mom being away a lot. If he was a Watcher he must have had a different role that he fulfilled from home, or else he wasn't involved at all. My dad, being the honorable man that I remembered him being, would probably have elected to look after his children first, forgetting about his Watcher duties. That thought made me love and miss him even more and a tear rolled down my cheek and splashed onto the photograph. I wiped the picture and put it back in the box.

There was a large army green traveling bag under the bench. I pulled it out, checked to see if it was empty, which it was. I needed clothes, having left all my stuff behind at Diane's. Since my Mom was a size twelve like me, I took some outfits from the locker and put them into the bag, along with the box containing the cash and ID's. On top of that stuff I put two handguns, a few boxes of bullets, the knife with the bone handle and the two short swords. I also threw in a few of the old books—the ones in English anyway—before I zipped up the bag.

My plan was to check into a hotel somewhere using the cash and one of the fake ID's. From there I would figure out a plan of some sort. I knew next to nothing about demons and all that Watcher stuff so I was hoping to learn from my mom's journal and the books she had. I could also teach myself to fight, maybe find a quiet spot in the woods somewhere outside the city where I could practice with the guns and swords. I felt ridiculous even considering such things, but I didn't see what choice I had. I was on my own and that was something I would just have to deal with. I wasn't about to drag Kasey into my nightmare either, even though she would probably lap it all up. I couldn't risk her getting killed by some demon who was after me.

I couldn't go back to Frank's either. The temper tantrum I pulled on him was probably uncalled for and I felt like an idiot for having done it. Frank was the only family I had at that point, so you'd think I'd be more nurturing of that relationship, especially since he had so much to offer me in terms of teaching me how to be a Watcher and getting my brother back. Call me stubborn, but I didn't feel like I could go back to Frank's after the way I treated him. I guessed I took after my mom in that respect. I also doubted he even wanted me back. He was

probably glad to be rid of me so he could go back to his life of solitude and whiskey in the mountains. For the time being at least I was on my own.

Outside the lockup, I set the bag on the floor while I bent down to lock the shutter. When I stood up again, there was a man standing right beside me. I cried out in shock and jumped back. “Jesus Christ!” I yelled. The man was bald headed, heavily built and past middle age. He wore dark jeans and a black polo shirt, reminding me of a nightclub bouncer. I was about to ask what the hell he thought he was doing sneaking up on a girl like that when I saw his face flicker and immediately I thought, *Oh shit*, because I knew what that flicker meant.

Sure enough the man smiled and his face took on a muddy red color with bony thorns all over it and two small horns jutting from his forehead. His eyes glowed yellow at me and I felt

adrenaline surge through my system like I’d just been given an epinephrine shot to the heart.

“What do you want?” I said, backing away from him, the bag on the ground the only thing between us.

“You, of course,” the demon said in a very deep voice, a sinister smile still on his red face, showing me pointed teeth.

Fuck this.

I went to run, but as I turned the demon was somehow right in front of me, blocking my path.

What the hell?

I turned the other way to run, but he appeared again right in front of me.

How was he doing that?

“You can’t run from me, girl,” he said in a voice that any death metal singer would be proud of.

“I have orders to take you with me.”

“Orders from whom?” I asked, the tremor in my voice giving away my fear. “Did you take my brother?”

“You mean, Josh? He’s with us now, as you will be also.”

Oh my god.

“Where is he?” My desperation made me sound more confident than I felt.

“He’s safe, don’t worry.” His face changed back to human, though his human face didn’t look any less evil and his eyes still glowed yellow. He held out his hand and softened his voice.

“Come with me and I will take you to him.”

I almost accepted his invitation, but something in me was screaming *no, no, no* and all at once I felt the same warm energy that I had felt the day before at Diane’s house, only this time it felt much stronger, pulsing through all of my muscles until I felt like a coiled snake, poised to strike.

So that’s exactly what I did. I leapt forward and hit him with a right cross as hard as I could, stunned when I felt his nose crumple under my fist, the power of the strike sending him reeling back.

Did I just do that? Holy shit. He’s going to kill me now for sure.

The demon wiped his hand across his face, blood gushing out of his broken nose. “You shouldn’t have done that.” He showed me his demon face again.

Oh shit, here we go.

I stood ready, my guard up. If I had time I would have grabbed the two short swords from the sports bag, but he would be on me by the time I did. It would have to be a fist fight.

The demon came running at me and I didn’t know what to do. I was frozen to the spot. When he hit me it was like a truck had run into me and I thought his shoulder had caved in my chest.

This isn’t good.

He picked me up and slammed me into the wall between two lockups. My head hit the concrete with a sickening thud and I fell to the floor in a heap when he let me drop. “I told you, you shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “My orders are to bring you back alive, which I will—but just barely.” His boot went into my stomach. I would have

screamed if I had the breath.

So this is it. My mission to save Josh ended already. If Mom were here she'd be disgusted.

Fight!

But he's too strong…

I tried to get up and as I did, he reached down and wrapped a large hand around my throat, lifting me up off my feet and pinning me to the wall. All I could smell was his rancid demon breath, like rotten meat mixed with sulfur. His yellow eyes had glee in them as he squeezed my throat.

Do something…

I punched him on the side of the head, but it wasn't enough for him to let go. His smile just broadened.

Just when I thought I was going to pass out I heard two loud bangs. The demon's hand let go of my throat and I fell to the floor again. I looked up, gasping for air to see the demon staggering back, clearly hurt, crying out in pain as more loud bangs—that I realized were gun shots—

resounded loudly in the hallway, making my ears ring.

Who's doing the shooting?

I could hardly believe it when I looked down the corridor to see the creepy old man from reception standing with a gun in his hand. He fired three more shots at the demon, causing it to cry out again and stagger back further. The demon's fierce yellow eyes lit upon me. "This isn't over, Watcher," he snarled and then he disappeared as if he was never there.

The old man was standing down the hallway like an aged Dirty Harry, a smoking gun in his hand. "You definitely owe me a look at them titties now," he said as casual as ever, seemingly unconcerned by the fact that he had just shot a demon.

"Jesus Christ," was all I could say.

"It was that mother of yours," the old man said to me after I'd lifted the bag and walked back to the reception desk, my throat sore and my

neck aching. “I had me a problem in here one time.

Load of vampires started nesting in the lockups. That mother of yours, she killed them all. Messy business, I tell you. Took me days to clean up the filth in this place.” He held up the gun he used to shoot the demon. “Gave me this gun, she did, and some kind of special bullets. Never had to use it till now. In return I gave her a unit, free of charge. That’s the only reason I haven’t cleared it out.”

“Thank you,” I said, inwardly thanking my mom at he same time.

“You just be careful, girly. Seems to me whatever your mother was into you’re into as well.

Dangerous business, no doubt.”

“Tell me about it.” I lifted the heavy sports bag. “Well, thanks again.” I went to walk out the front doors.

“No titties?” he called after me.

I shook my head and couldn’t help but smile. The old man was persistent, I’d give him that.

Chapter 8

I took one of the knives out of the bag before closing the trunk and sitting in the car. I figured I'd need some protection in case I ran into any more demons, which according to the demon who just attacked me, was highly likely. I put the knife inside my coat and sat for a bit, wondering how to make my next move.

I had been lucky in there with that demon. Even though it said it needed me alive to take me to its boss—whoever that was—it still could have hurt me, not to mention taken me away with it. I was half angry with myself for not just going with it. At least then I would have known where Josh was.

I had to face up to the fact that I was too inexperienced at all this Watcher/demon fighting business. I could have continued on alone, learning as I went, possibly stumbling across leads as to Josh's whereabouts, but how long would that take?

I was forced to admit that I couldn't do it all alone, and the only help I could think of was my Uncle Frank. Despite my not exactly warming to him, he was the only other Watcher I knew, the only person with enough experience to help me. I swallowed my pride, started the car up and headed back to the cabin.

Bane came running out of the cabin, barking excitedly as I got out of the car, jumping up and placing his big paws on my chest a he tried to lick my face. "Down, boy," I said, actually glad to see the dog. Frank stood by the front door, his arms crossed as he watched me get the bag from the trunk and carry it towards the cabin.

"You planning on staying a while?" he asked, allowing me to pass into the cabin.

I dropped the heavy bag on the floor with a thud. "Okay, Frank, it's like this," I said. "You're my Uncle, but I hardly know you. I'm not even sure I trust you. But my mom trusted you, so I'm just going to give you the benefit of the doubt. My brother has been kidnapped, I've got demons after me, I'm totally new to all this Watcher stuff and you're about the only one in this world who can help me. "

Frank seemed to consider what I said, then he went to the kitchen and got two bottles of beer from the fridge, came back and handed me

one. “I don’t drink beer,” I said.

“Well, you do now.” He opened both bottles. Frank took a long swig from his beer, then waited for me to do the same. I took a small sip, wincing at the taste.

“Remind me to get some vodka in here,” I said.

“Your mom’s drink.”

God, was I just some sort of carbon copy of my mom or what?

“While we’re on the subject, I have no idea why my mother would give up her soul to save you.

Fair enough, she may have felt responsible for getting you killed or whatever, but you know, people die—especially if they chase after monsters all the time—so I don’t understand why she didn’t just accept that, unless of course she had deeper feelings for you.” I paused for a second.

“Were you sleeping with my mom, Frank?”

He almost choked on his beer. “No,” he said, coughing and shaking his head. “No.”

My eyes narrowed as I tried to figure out if he was lying. “It just seems a bit much to be giving up your life for someone else if you didn’t love them.”

Frank went and sat down in one of the armchairs by the fire. I joined him in the other chair.

“Look,” he said. “Rachel—your mom—had a savior complex. She thought it was her duty to

save everyone, no matter the risk to herself. I used to tell her, you gotta look out for yourself as well, but she could never help being a martyr. It was who she was.”

I stared into the fire. It was like my mom had been two different people, the one I barely saw at home—the distance, often preoccupied, but still loving parent—and the woman who ran around after monsters, fighting the good fight, saving the world from evil and ready to sacrifice herself if need be; the woman who put her brother-in-law above herself and her own family. That still didn’t make any

sense to me. There was obviously more to the story than Frank was willing to reveal.

“So she sacrificed her soul,” I said. “What does that even mean? That her soul is in Hell or something?”

“Yeah.” Frank looked away into the crackling fire. “Her soul is in Hell.”

The thought horrified me. What did that even mean? How did that work? “Please tell me my mom isn’t going to be tortured for all eternity.” Frank gave me a blank look, saying nothing.

“Jesus, really?” He nodded. “That’s even worse. She did that, knowing what would happen to her?” I shook my head, still horrified at the thought of my mom being trapped in Hell of all places.

“Let’s not talk about this,” Frank said. “What’s done is done.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re alive. You’re not the one suffering in Hell for all eternity.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” he snapped. “There’s not a day that goes by when I don’t think about it.” He tugged hard on his beer. “If I could go back and change things I would, but I can’t so…”

“Isn’t there anything we can do to get her out of there?” Stupid question, but I had to ask.

Frank shook his head. “No, unless you wanna go down there and get her.”

“That can be done? You can actually rescue someone from Hell?”

“I’ve never heard of it being done. That’s not to say it can’t be done. I’ve been looking for a way for years. Haven’t found one yet.”

So there was a sliver of hope that my mom could be saved. “What about my dad?”

Frank shifted in his seat, crossed his legs. “What about him?”

“Is he in Hell too?”

“No.”

“How’d you know?”

“I asked around. Demons.”

“I saw my mom being taken, you know. Saw the demon take her away.”

“You saw the hell hounds as well?”

So that’s what they were, the long-haired beasts with the red eyes.

“Just one. It killed my dad.”

“I know. They kill anything that gets in their way. Hell hounds are supposed to kill the body and take the soul. In your mom’s case, things were more personal. The demon came for her

personally.”

“What demon?”

“The demon she made the pact with. Can we talk about something else now? I really don’t feel like going over all this right now.”

Easy for you to say, I felt like saying to him. *You know the whole story. I don’t.* But I could see he was finding it painful talking about all that stuff, so I gave him a break. I’d only just returned after walking out on him, after all. Reaching inside my jacket, I took out a joint. “You mind?”

“Is that weed?” he asked, amused.

“It calms me.” I lit the joint by holding it in the flames of the fire for a second, handing it to him after I took a few drags. He hesitated, but then took it from me.

“Been a while.” He took three deep drags on the joint, almost coughing as he exhaled the last one.

A few minutes later, the two of us were mildly stoned. Physically, I felt more relaxed. Frank looked like he was melting into his seat. “Here’s what I can’t figure out,” I said. “If you were so close to my mom and you were my dad’s brother, how come we never even saw you before?”

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about this,” he said. “Long story short, your dad and I had a falling out before you and your brother were born. We didn’t see each other, didn’t speak.”

“But you saw my mom.”

“Yeah, we worked together sometimes on cases, helped each other out with hunts.”

“Why’d you fall out with my dad?”

“That’s personal,” he said, his tone making it clear that he had no intention of elaborating on that.

I took a few more drags on the joint and handed the rest to him. “Still doesn’t explain why you never adopted me and my brother. We ended up in care.”

“Are you kidding? Me, with the life I lead, looking after two little kids? I couldn’t do it.” He finished the joint and threw the butt in the fire, gazing at it as it turned to ash in the flames.

“Whatever, Frank,” I said after a moment’s silence. “I’m not here to bust your balls or anything.

I just want your help getting my brother back. You don’t have to see me or him after that.”

Frank didn’t respond. The two of us sat, two stoners staring into the fire, lost in reverie—or at least Frank was. The silence was killing me; the weed was not helping my paranoia. I was about to get up to go to the kitchen for some water (the weed had given me cotton mouth and I didn’t want to drink the beer that sat on the floor at my feet), when Frank asked me what was in the bag. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, droopy. He looked wiped by the weed and whatever alcohol he had consumed that day.

“Stuff from my mom’s bat cave,” I said. “Weapons and clothes, mostly.”

“Clothes? You mean her hunting gear?”

Hunting gear?

“Yeah, a few outfits I found in there. I needed clothes, so…”

“What weapons?”

“Two swords, knives and two handguns.”

“You know how to use them?”

“Not really, but that’s partly why I’m here, so you can teach me.”

He stood up, placed his empty beer bottle on the mantle above the fireplace. “Training starts tomorrow, then,” he said. “Right now, I need to piss.”

“Good to see you minding your manners in front of a lady.”

“I don’t see any ladies in here, do you?”

I thought he was being serious for a second until he smirked. I smirked back and shook my head.

“Whatever.”

That night I slept in the spare bedroom again, though I didn’t sleep very well. I was still shaken by the demon who attacked me at the lockup and thanks to the weed, I was aware of every sound coming from outside the cabin, so whatever sleep I had was shallow and fitful. I lay for most of the night thinking about my mom, about how she was trapped in Hell, about the terrible

experiences she must be going through. It wasn’t my fault she was there, but I resolved that I would find a way to save her soul, whatever it took. It seemed I had also inherited her savior complex. That went for Josh too. I would save him, even if it meant sacrificing myself in the process. I would do what I had to. We had looked out for each other our whole lives. I wasn’t about to stop now.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Frank made us breakfast of bacon and eggs that I devoured because I hadn't eaten in about two days. Then he took us outside to the front of the cabin, to the edge of the trees where the punching bag was hung. The early morning sun was shining brightly and there was a breeze that gave me goose bumps. The air up on the mountainside was clear and crisp and much more breathable than the dank air in Mercy City down below. I wore a pair of my mom's black jeans along with combat boots and a black long-sleeved top. Frank said the resemblance to my mom was uncanny. I was getting kind of tired of hearing that, to the point where I felt overshadowed by her, even though she wasn't around.

Frank was dressed in the same faded blue jeans he had on the day before, as well as a light-colored shirt that was only buttoned half way. With his unruly hair and beard growth, he looked like he had been dragged through a hedge backwards. "It normally takes years to get a real handle on your powers," he explained as we stood beside the punching bag. "We don't have years, so you're going to have to pick up as much as you can as quickly as you can. The rest you can learn on the job."

"On the job?"

"Yeah, I have a few cases I'm working on. If I think you're ready, I'll take you with me so you can get some experience."

"I already have experience," I said. "I was attacked by a demon last night."

Frank looked surprised and a little miffed. "You never told me that."

"I told you demons were after me. Anyway, it didn't go so well. It could have killed me if it wanted. The old guy at the lockup saved me."

"Hector?"

"Yeah, the creepy old guy, always wants to see my tits." Frank laughed at that. "He shot the demon and it disappeared. Can they like, teleport or something?"

He was still chuckling to himself over Hector asking to see my tits.

“Yeah,” he said. “They can, which makes them harder to fight sometimes.”

“I gathered that.”

“Okay, so listen. Your powers are latent, but you still have to bring them to the surface through training. It takes some people longer than others. If you’re anything like your mom you should be fine.”

Mom again.

“Let’s do it then.” I started bouncing up and down like I was getting ready to run a marathon.

“What are you doing?”

“Warming up.” I was swinging my arms around the way they used to make us do in gym class back in high school.

Frank shook his head. “Forget warming up. You’ll get plenty warm once we start. You go from cold, always. What are you going to do, tell the demons to hold it till you’re ready?”

I stopped jumping around. “No.”

“Well then, start hitting the bag, hand strikes only first.”

I took a few breaths, stood in front of the heavy bag, and started hitting it with my fists, single shots at first and then combinations, trying my best to hit the leather as hard as I could. “That’s it,” Frank coaxed. “Remember—body weight, that’s what counts, not speed but power. Do as much damage as you can with every single shot. And don’t forget to breathe. Breathe out on impact. You feel the Light Energy yet?”

I stopped hitting the bag. “Light Energy?”

“Some people call it Grace. I’m no angel, so I don’t call it that. It’s the source of our power. It comes from the angel DNA. You should be feeling it inside, coursing through you. Kinda feels like an electric current sometimes.”

“I think I’ve felt it, but more when I’ve been scared or in some kind of danger.”

“It activates by itself when you’re in trouble. You have to learn to control it or it will just take you over. Watch.” Frank went to the

punching bag and threw a short punch at it. I was shocked to see white light explode from his fist as it struck the bag, sending the bag swinging backwards with such force that I thought it would fly off into the trees beyond.

“Holy shit!”

“My powers aren’t what they used to be, not since I died and came back, but they’re still there.

With practice, you should be able to channel a lot more power than that.”

“I can do that? Awesome!”

“Don’t get too excited. Use it too much and it’ll drain you, leaving you vulnerable. Use it sparingly and wisely.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding, unable to believe that I had such power in me. “How do I bring it out?”

“You just concentrate, channel it. Try it.”

Standing in front of the black leather bag, I started to focus on the Light Energy that I could feel pulsing through my body like a mild electric current. I breathed deeply a couple of times and then hit the bag with a right cross. The punch felt powerful, but no light exploded from my fist the way it did with Frank’s. “That’s okay,” he said. “Do it again. Try to visualize the light coming from your fist.”

I did as he said, visualized white light coming from my fist as I struck the bag again. I couldn’t help but squeal with delight when a small amount of light came from my hand, sending the bag swinging back further than I had managed already. “I did it!”

“Yeah, you did,” Frank said, not sharing my excitement. “Now do it again. Try for more energy this time.”

Stoked by my previous success, I concentrated hard and really visualized the white Light Energy exploding out of me. Only this time I also pictured the demon who had attacked me the night before. I replaced the bag with his image so that when I hit the bag it felt like I was driving my fist into the demon’s chest. Even Frank looked shocked when the bag swung back with so much force that it snapped the thick tree branch it was tethered to, both bag and branch sailing back about six feet into the woods. “Oh my God!” I yelled.

“Fuck me,” Frank said in a quiet voice as he stared at the bag in the distance.

The Light Energy was pulsing strongly within me, almost like there was a whole other being of light in me trying to get out. I felt god damn invincible at that point. “Holy fucking shit! That was… awesome!” I could hardly contain my excitement. I’d never felt so powerful.

Frank was looking at me strangely and I asked him what was up. “Nothing,” he said. “I’ve never seen anyone hit with that much power. No Nephilim anyway.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean only angels hit like that.”

“So what, I’m an angel now?” I said, laughing.

“No, but… I don’t know. Not even your mom was that powerful.”

I shrugged. “Maybe it was just a fluke.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He didn’t seem convinced. “Either way, you still gotta learn to control it. That power is nothing without skill. Demons fight like motherfuckers. You have to learn to fight like a motherfucker too.”

“Like a motherfucker, huh?” I laughed, still high off my recent success.

“Let’s go over here and try some free-fighting.”

I followed Frank into the middle of the grass clearing where we faced off like two gladiators.

Well, one gladiator and a girl who barely knew what she was doing. I didn’t much like my odds.

“The object here is for you to learn to use your instincts,” he said. “It’s like I told you, everything you need to know has been hardcoded into your DNA. Nephilim are soldiers, it’s why we were made. You need to tap into that programming.”

Tap into the programming. Got it.

I adopted my fighting stance—hands up, fists held loosely, shoulders

hunched, chin down. A wave of excitement rippled through my belly. I'd sparred before with Josh, but that was just play-fighting. I got the impression Frank wasn't into play-fighting.

"Loosen up," he said. "You're too stiff." He assumed a relaxed stance, his arms up, but his hands open. "You use your arms to control the space in front of you. Walk towards me."

I did as he asked and he kept me at a distance with one arm, circling around me as he did.

"Always have your arms out front, controlling the space between you and your opponent. Use your lead arm to control and the back one to strike." He threw a lightning quick punch, pulling it just before it smashed into my face. I couldn't help but flinch. "If it's a stand off, you hit first, don't wait on them attacking. Use the element of shock and surprise to gain the upper hand. Hit hard, hit first and keep hitting 'till the bastard is down. Got it?"

"I got it. Sucker punch them."

"Yeah, kind of like that, but you have to set them up right. Talk to them, distract them, then strike." He assumed his fighting stance again. "Alright—attack me."

Excitement mixed with adrenaline coursed through me. I never got that sparing Josh because I always knew it was just messing around. This was different. This felt like serious training. I advanced towards Frank and threw a few punches to his head, all of which he managed to parry or avoid, seemingly with no effort.

"Again. This time with more intent—but be careful with that Light Energy. I don't want to end up on the roof of the cabin."

I smiled at the mental image of Frank flying back through the air and landing with a crash on the roof. I attacked him again, this time more forcefully, pressing forward with punches before switching to kicks. Again, nothing landed. It seemed that Frank was just too experienced to let anything hit him. The frustration and anger built in me and I did my best to keep them down—to try and remain Zen about things—but it was difficult. My aggression wanted to be unleashed. I gritted my teeth, went in again, this time using my lead arm to knock away his guard slightly before snapping a punch into his jaw. "Shit! Sorry Frank."

He shook his head, moving his jaw around like he was making sure it

wasn't broken.

How many jaws has he broken in his lifetime, I wonder?

"Don't apologize. Are you going to say sorry to some demon when you hit him?"

I snorted. "No."

"Then don't say sorry to me. Now attack me again. This time, try to get an index. Try to touch me with your lead hand. If you can touch me, you can hit me, even if you're blind. Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Just close them." I closed my eyes. "Now try to touch me with your lead arm. Once you do, hit me with your other hand."

Feeling slightly silly, I closed my eyes and kept my left arm extended out in front of me as I tried to touch him. As soon as I felt him, I struck with my right hand. "Awesome," I said after I opened my eyes. "I couldn't miss."

"No, you couldn't," he said, wiping a streak of blood from his mouth. I was about to apologize again when I thought better of it. "Alright, you know what to do now. Let's fight."

For the next twenty minutes Frank and I fought. I did most of the attacking—trying to land punches, elbows, knees and kicks while he mostly defended, although a few times he hit me. The strikes didn't hurt exactly, but I felt shocked and stupid when they landed. Getting hit also stoked my anger. "You have to be able to take the hits," he said as we fought. "You gotta toughen up.

You *will* get hit. You'll get the shit beat out of you sometimes. That's fighting."

As time went on, I found myself catching him with strikes more and more. I was getting

comfortable with the various fighting techniques, doing as he said, allowing my instincts to run the show. It seemed to be working. "What about defense?" I asked.

"There is no defense," he said. "There's only offense." I frowned, unsure of what he meant. "By defending, you're reacting to your

opponent, so you'll always be one step behind. You'll end up overwhelmed and beaten. Even if you're being hit, keep your attack going. Doesn't matter what the other guy is doing, you do your own thing, blast through his attack like it isn't even there.

Always attack the attacker. Let me show you."

Frank came forward. I blocked, parried, dodged, and moved, but he always seemed one step ahead and I ended up backtracking and nearly tripping over myself. "See?" he said. "Now attack back this time."

When Frank came in again, I initially covered against his strikes, but then straight away started striking back, not caring what he was throwing at me as long as I got my own hits in, which I did, pressing forward, punching, elbow striking until I finally threw a hard kick at his chest.

White light burst from my foot and into his sternum, sending him flying back at least four feet where he landed heavily on the hard ground. "Oh shit!" I stood for a few seconds in shock and amazement at what I'd done before I rushed over to help him up.

"It's okay," he said, sitting up on the grass. "I'm just glad I still have my healing powers. Very nice, by the way."

"Thanks." I smiled. "I didn't mean that, though. It just happened."

"Isn't that what we're trying to do here? Hone your instincts?"

"I guess so. Yeah."

"You can't give monsters any quarter," he said, getting to his feet. "They'll rip you apart if you do. Go in for the kill at all times. That's also why we have weapons. The unarmed stuff is for when you can't get to your weapon or for when you need to get the other guy off you so you can get to your weapon."

"We gonna train weapons now then?" I got even more excited at the prospect of training with the swords I took from my mom's lockup. Frankly, I was enjoying the training a lot more than I thought I would. I'd never felt so vital and alive, the Light Energy pulsing through me, reinforcing me.

"Sure, we'll train with the weapons."

After getting the swords and knives from the bag inside the cabin, I went back outside to the clearing where Frank was waiting. He had a wooden training sword in his hand, with two shorter wooden swords on the ground beside him. I gave him the knife and he explained it was a demon killing knife, that it was magically reinforced by the symbols carved into it. It would kill most demons apparently, or at the very least, hurt them.

He started showing me how to handle the knife, again using the lead arm to control space, index, grab, check and parry, the knife itself in the back hand, always ready to stab and slash. We spent some time practicing movements with the knife, slashing the air, stabbing forward, blocking incoming attacks and countering with the blade. After a while, the knife became comfortable in my hand and Frank showed me some of the vital attack points to go for, including the heart, neck, liver, and kidneys. “Anywhere that’s going to quickly shut down the body,” he said.

Finally, we picked up the wooden swords. Frank took the long one and I took the two shorter swords. Once again, he explained to me the mechanics of sword fighting, which wasn’t a whole lot different from the knife-fighting. Eventually, once I had learned how to hold the swords properly and what kind of movements worked best, we did some free fighting. As I expected, Frank got the better of me, his sword somehow managing to find its way past my guard *all* the time. I was still getting used to the weapons, but eventually I was able to land a few blows on him.

Soon I picked up the real things: my mom’s two short swords. Sunlight flashed off the blades as I slashed the air with them while Frank watched, correcting me on footwork and body

mechanics. Pretty soon I was able to relax into the movements until it almost felt like moving meditation.

“You know how to practice now,” Frank said, gathering up the weapons. “You just have to keep doing it. The more you practice, the better you get. As your mom used to say, the more you sweat in training the less you bleed in battle.”

“She used to say that?” I wasn’t that surprised.

“Your mom took it all very seriously. That’s why she was one of the best.”

Lot to live up to then.

“What about my dad?” I asked as we were walking back to the cabin. It was early afternoon at that point. We’d been training solidly for several hours and I was famished. Still full of energy, though. I could have trained all day.

“What about him?” Frank asked. We entered the cabin, put the weapons on the floor by the door, and went into the kitchen were Frank poured orange juice for me and beer for himself.

“How involved was he with all this?” I remember my dad being around most of the time,

working from home as an accountant apparently, although that could have been a cover for all I knew.

“He pretty much stopped being involved after you guys were born,” Frank said after downing half a bottle of beer. “He was good in the field, he had skills. He preferred the books, though.

Doing research, finding spells, that sort of thing. He worked in the background a lot.”

“So he wasn’t an accountant?”

“No, he wasn’t.”

I shook my head. “So when were they going to tell us about all this Watcher stuff? How long were they gonna keep it from us?”

Frank shrugged. “As long as possible, I guess. They just wanted you to have a normal childhood like every other kid.”

“Yeah, that really worked out.” I couldn’t keep the bitterness from my voice, though I let it go straight away, not wanting to wreck the buzz from the training. “What about money? How do you guys live? I found a load of cash in my Mom’s lockup. Where’d she get it?”

Frank started busying himself chopping vegetables for some sort of stew he was making. “My father—your grandfather—was a wealthy man. He owned a few companies that did well. Money is never a problem.”

“Great, so we get paid to kick ass then?” I was only joking, but Frank threw me a look anyway.

“We get what we need, no more.” I left him to his cooking so I could

grab a shower, as I smelled a bit ripe. “Shooting practice after we eat,” he called after me.

“Looking forward to it.”

After I showered and ate the beef stew Frank had cooked (which was delicious), I took one of the guns—Frank later informed me were Glocks—from the sports bag and went out the back with Frank. There another grass clearing, the tree line starting about fifty yards away. Just on the tree line there were three paper targets erected, like the ones you see at gun ranges. “Awesome,” I said, eying the targets. “I get to shoot at those?”

“Not yet,” Frank said. “Basics first.”

For the next hour Frank went over the basics of gun safety, showing me how to hold a gun, where the safety was, what stance to take while holding the gun. He made me dry fire for a while before allowing me to load any bullets into the Glock. “Do bullets hurt demons and monsters?”

“With demons we use iron-tipped bullets. They get hurt by iron. We have different bullets for different creatures, but iron usually takes care of most of them.”

After I loaded in a clip, I assumed the stance Frank had taught me: one leg slightly forward, gun held in the right hand, left hand for support, finger on the trigger guard, never on the trigger unless you’re going to shoot. “Just relax and breathe,” he said as I aimed the gun at one of the targets. “Squeeze the trigger as you breathe out.”

I centered myself and pulled the trigger, a huge surge of adrenaline hitting me when the gun made a loud bang and bucked in my hand, causing me to miss the target completely. “Shit.”

“Don’t worry. Try again. Remember, relax and smoothly pull the trigger. Don’t jerk it.”

I tried again, squeezed the trigger on the out breath, this time managing to hold the gun more steadily so I was able to at least hit the outside of the target. More confident, I fired again, and then again, each time getting closer to the center of the target. As I continued to fire, the gun felt better in my hand and after a while I was able to relax, which made the whole thing easier.

Before I emptied the clip, the last bullet hit near center mass, not quite in the middle, but near enough. I smiled, pleased with myself.

“Not bad,” Frank said. He raised his own gun and fired at one of the other targets, rapidly squeezing off a full clip, every bullet tightly grouped in the center of the target. He lowered the gun, a cloud of smoke around him, and the smell of cordite in the air.

“Show off,” I said.

“Practice,” he countered. “Keep at it. I have to make a phone call.” Frank walked back to the cabin to make his phone call and I loaded another clip into the Glock and started shooting again, happy when all my shots hit the target. As I was loading another clip Frank returned. “I have to go.”

“Go where?”

“I got a lead on a case I’m working on. I gotta go check it out.” He started to walk away. “I’ll be back later.”

“Hold up,” I said, following him. “I want to come with.”

“No, it’s too dangerous.”

I took offense to that. “You’re supposed to be training me. Isn’t the best training on the job?

That’s what you said to me. Come on, Frank.” I widened my eyes at him, almost willing him to take me with him.

He thought for a moment. “Alright, you can come.” Before I could say how awesome it was, he said, “On the condition that you do as I say, no matter what.”

“Got it, sure, no problem. Do as you say.” He still didn’t seem convinced by the idea. I think he thought I was humoring him, which I was a bit. I couldn’t help it. I was just excited to go into the field for the first time. “I’m supposed to be this Watcher now, I should be doing… Watcher stuff.

I need the experience.”

“Experience.” He said like it was a bad word, motioning for me to follow him. “Believe me, once you get it, you’ll probably wish you didn’t.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Chapter 10

About half an hour later, Frank was driving us through Mercy City in his black Chevrolet, heading towards the rundown east side that was predominantly populated by gangbangers and drug cartels. They were never done killing each other in that part of the city. I ventured into it a few times in the past with Kasey to buy drugs, and last time, I vowed never again after we got surrounded by a bunch of gangbangers who refused to let us leave unless we gave every one of them blowjobs. Seriously. It was only a passing cop car that allowed us to get away, distracting the gang long enough for us to run.

So I wasn't exactly thrilled that Frank was driving us into that area, passing by the projects and youths hanging around on every street who looked at us like we were their mortal enemies.

"What the hell are we doing here, Frank?" I asked. "This place sucks."

"Well, you'd better get used to things sucking," Frank said, seemingly unaffected by the stares we were getting from almost everyone we passed. "Because this job sucks big time."

"That's encouraging, Frank. Thanks for that."

"Just telling the truth. Did you think chasing monsters was going to be a walk in the park?"

"No, obviously."

"Well then, welcome to the job." He pulled the car up along a stretch of wasteland on the edge of the projects. Across the street was an old abandoned factory building that was just about the grimmest thing I'd ever seen. It was long and sprawling and every window in the place had long since been broken. Through the windows all you could see was vast darkness.

"What's in there?" I asked. "You still haven't told me what we're doing."

"I've been chasing a vampire for months now," Frank said, looking out the window at the factory building. "Normally I don't bother too much with vamps, not unless they do something to get on my radar."

"Like killing people for blood, you mean?"

“Vamps do what they gotta do. I’m not going to chase every one of them down. This one turned a senator’s daughter a while back.” He pulled a photograph out of his jacket and handed it to me.

The picture was of a young girl, pretty with long blonde hair and big blue eyes, dressed in riding gear and standing by a stable with a horse in the background.

“Poor girl,” I said, handing the photo back. “Still, a senator’s daughter is more important than anyone else, is that how it goes?”

“No, but I got asked by the senator to kill the vamp who did it. It pays to keep in good graces with these guys sometimes. Now he’ll owe me.”

I shook my head. “Politics.”

“Politics makes the world go ‘round. Don’t be so naïve.” He got out of the car and I followed him to the trunk. When he opened it, he lifted a false bottom, revealing an entire array of weapons underneath.

“Holy shit, Frank.”

“I like to be prepared.” He reached into the trunk and took out two machetes, handing me one.

“Here.”

“No stakes? I thought you needed wooden stakes to kill a vampire.”

“Decapitation is the best way. Cut the sucker’s head right off. No pun intended.”

I hefted the machete in my hand, took a few practice swings. It was heavy and very sharp and I wondered how many vamps Frank had killed with it over the years. He also took a gun and put it in the waistband of his jeans. “I thought guns couldn’t kill vampires,” I said.

“It makes me feel better carrying it.” He closed the trunk and looked around to make sure no one was watching us. We were pretty much alone it seemed, though I still felt jumpy. “A few ground rules before we go in there,” Frank said. “Number one, stay behind me at all times and don’t wander off on your own. Number two, if we meet any vamps in there—which we will—you

don’t hesitate, you use that thing to kill them or they’ll kill you.”

I nodded, the reality of the situation we were about to walk into now

sinking in. Fear whispered in my ear as it waited in the wings. “What’s number three?”

“When we find the head vamp you let me take care of him. No heroics. This vamp is old and very cunning. You wouldn’t be the first hunter to die at his hands.”

“What if you need help? Am I supposed to just to stand there?”

“Hopefully, I won’t need help, but if I do… just be careful. I don’t want a teen vampire living in my cabin.”

I laughed nervously. “A teen vampire, seriously?”

“This vamp enjoys turning people more than killing them. He’s got a serious grudge against humanity.”

I didn’t like the idea of having to feed off human blood the rest of my life. “Just make sure you kill him then.”

Darkness was descending as we entered the old factory building through a set of double doors that were swinging open in the wind. As I followed behind Frank, stepping into the darkness of the factory, my stomach turned over, making me nauseous. I switched on the flashlight Frank had given me and was glad when I felt the buzz of the Light Energy pulse in me, helping to alleviate some of the fear that was making its presence felt in ever greater amounts. I gripped the machete tight, ready to swing it at anything that came near me. My breathing was shallow so I forced myself to take a deep breath. “It stinks in here,” I said in a hushed voice. It was the smell of decay. Rank. Awful.

“No talking,” Frank admonished.

I shut up and moved my flashlight around as I followed behind him. The place was quiet, ominously so, apart from the ambient sounds you would expect in such a building—creaking metal, the scurrying of rats and pigeons, dripping pipes. I was thoroughly creeped out by the situation already, and I wished I hadn’t been so insistent about coming along. I was also full of admiration for Frank, at the fact that he would even consider going to such a place alone.

Had my mom been that brave?

Probably. Not too sure if she passed her bravery on to me though. It didn’t feel like it as I moved through the dark factory, wondering what

I was going to do if I ran into any vampires. Scream maybe. Run like hell. The latter wasn't an option, not if I wanted to build any credibility as a hunter.

We moved down a wide corridor with doors on either side that lead to old office rooms that still had furniture in them. Frank quickly checked each room, shining his flashlight into the dark. I kept expecting some vampire to suddenly appear in the light, all fangs and burning eyes, ready to come at us, but nothing did. "They usually stay together in a nest," Frank said as we moved deeper into the factory. "I don't know how many there are, so stay alert and ready."

I swallowed hard and nodded, trying to come across like I had my shit together. On the inside I was a bag of nerves and at one point I almost screamed as a pigeon came flying out of one of the empty rooms, swooping past my face, making me jump back in alarm and almost drop the

flashlight. What an idiot! Frank didn't pass any remarks. It seemed he expected such amateur behavior from me.

The air seemed to get thicker and the smell more pungent the further into the factory we went.

We had covered most of the place already, and I was starting to wonder if Frank had gotten his facts wrong, that there was nobody in that place except pigeons and rats. But then as we turned the corner of the corridor we were walking down, Frank suddenly stopped and I nearly slammed into him. "What is it?" I whispered.

He pointed with his machete towards a set of swinging doors to the right of the corridor. "In there," he said. He moved towards the doors and I followed him, wondering what sound he had heard because I heard nothing. Maybe he just *sensed* the presence of a vampire, I didn't know. I just know that as we walked through the swinging doors my heart was pounding so loudly in my chest that I was sure any vampire nearby would be able to hear it.

The room we ended up in used to be some kind of storage area. It had racks of shelves in it, some of which still held boxes, though I didn't know what was in them, nor did I care. The only thing on my mind at that point was staying alert and sharp enough so I wouldn't get killed. As we shone our torches around the room, my eyes widened and I felt a rush of adrenaline when I noticed a face and two burning red eyes in the light. The creature snarled in our direction for a second, showing

its fangs.

Holy shit. So they really do exist.

The vampire didn't look like I expected it to. I always thought vampires kept their human appearance, but this one didn't. It looked more like a creature than anything human. It was completely naked for a start, with waxy white skin that reminded me of the fat on a cut of beef.

Underneath the skin I could make out blue veins like dye had been poured into the things blood stream, causing every vein to stand out in the light. There wasn't a single hair on its head either and its mouth seemed too big for its face, stretched grotesquely to accommodate the multiple rows of sharp teeth in there. Some sort of fluid also dribbled from its mouth, maybe saliva, I didn't know or care. The thing scuttled out of the light and I heard it hissing as it retreated.

Frank and I shone our flashlights into the room, trying to locate the creature again as we stood with our machetes at the ready. I swore to myself that if that thing came near me, I would cut it to pieces rather than let it touch me. The light being was straining within me and I took comfort from it, despite the fear that made me shake like a person on a narrow ledge a thousand feet up.

"Look out!" I heard Frank's voice and looked around me in a panic, but couldn't see anything.

Something made me look up and there was the vampire crawling down the wall towards me like some grotesque spider, its huge mouth open and drooling, its razor teeth bared. I looked into its fiery red eyes and froze as it detached itself from the wall and jumped down to land in front of me in a crab-like position, its long talons clacking on the hard floor.

Before I could even think about raising my machete I felt a rush of wind and saw Frank's machete swish past my face, missing me by inches. His blade connected with the neck of the vampire, slicing right through until its head fell from its shoulders. I could only stand in shock as the headless body fell to the floor in front of me, blood pumping from the stump where the head used to be. "You alright?" Frank asked.

I nodded, unable to speak.

"Stay on guard, there's probably more of them." No sooner had the

words left Frank's mouth than the swinging doors burst open and two more vampires came running into the room. The creatures both looked nearly the same except for their decrepit genitalia. Obviously, one was a man, the other a woman. Both had burning red eyes and bared teeth. So many teeth. If they managed to get a bite in they would do major damage.

Frank immediately rushed forward and swung his machete at the two vampires, one of whom—

the woman—climbed one of the shelving units and crouched on top of it, staring down at me like an angry gargoyle. I knew it would pounce, so I took a defensive stance, raised the machete over my head, and prepared myself.

The vampire launched itself off the shelving unit, hurtling down towards me, its arms

outstretched with clawed hands ready to grab and tear me to pieces. I jumped back as the vampire landed in front of me. "You're dead, bitch," it snarled in garbled growl, all those teeth making it hard to even talk, then it stood up and ran at me. Instinctively, I stepped to the side and swung my machete high and fast, felt it hit something a second later with a squelchy thud followed by an inhuman screeching sound that made my ears hurt. Frantically, I shone the flashlight into the gloom looking for the injured creature. I spotted it crouching in the corner like a wounded animal, blood pouring from a deep gash in its neck.

I didn't think. I charged towards it and brought the machete down hard on the creature, hitting it with a downward slash that connected with the open wound in its neck. The machete went

halfway into the vampire's neck and it screamed again, its claws swiping at me as I kicked it in the chest to keep it down. Pulling the machete out, I took another swing and finally took off the vampire's head before staring half in shock at what I had done, adrenaline blasting through me, my stomach heaving at the bloody carnage I had inflicted. It was the first time I had ever killed anything and my mind struggled to deal with the fact.

"Leia, you okay?" Frank appeared beside me, blood splatter on his face.

"I'm okay," I said, still trying to decide if I was.

Frank put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Good job. The other one is dead as well.”

I looked over and shone the torch to see the other vampire lying dead on the floor, dark blood still spurting from its headless body. “This is fucked up, Frank.” I was wired with adrenaline and Light Energy, my eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets. I’d never felt so switched on, so anchored in the present moment. As scared and confused as I was, I was also exhilarated. I realized then why my mom was so into hunting monsters. Aside from the bloodletting the hunt was the biggest thrill I’d ever felt in my life.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said. “Let’s go. We have to find the senator’s daughter and the head vamp.”

Frank moved out of the room. I followed behind, the floor awash with blood, so much so that I slipped and almost fell, the wall saving me from tripping and getting covered in vampire goo.

Frank stopped, threw me a look, and then carried on out the door.

Idiot, Leia.

Out in the corridor, we made our way carefully to the heart of the factory, which turned out to be a large open space full of huge rusty machines that were all cogs and gears and levers, the kind of machines you couldn’t help but be awed by for their size and feat of engineering. Like the rest of the factory, the room was deathly quiet, not even any animal noises. My gut told me the head vampire was holed up in there somewhere. I gripped the machete tighter, especially when I heard faint scuffling sounds in the room, like something was moving around in there, stalking us.

Frank and I both acknowledged the noises in the background and he nodded for me to stay on guard. I followed behind him as we did a search around the perimeter of the room first, finding nothing. Then we moved between the machinery, Frank checking every machine: under it, over it and in it.

I was about to say to him that maybe the head vamp dude was hiding somewhere else when a screaming vampire jumped out of one of the machines beside Frank and leapt on his back, clawing at his face, causing him to drop his torch. “Frank!” I raised my machete, ready to strike.

“No!” Frank shouted as he tried to get the creature off his back and I

realized it was the senator's daughter clawing at him, the girl's wild mane of hair whipping into Frank's face as he tried to get a grip on her. The girl still looked human, not like the other vamps we killed. I didn't know what to do as I stood and watched Frank struggle with the fledgling vampire girl. Finally, he flipped her off his back and slammed her down on the factory floor. He then pulled a bottle out of his coat, quickly popped the cap, and threw some sort of liquid that I guessed wasn't whiskey all over the girl vampire, who screamed like she had just been burned by acid before scurrying off like a cockroach under one of the machines and out of sight.

Frank breathed hard as he bent down to pick up his flashlight. His face was scratched and bleeding, but he didn't seem to notice. "Holy water," he said. "Never leave home without it.

Now we just have to find…"

I frowned when he stopped talking and his eyes widened in shock.

"What...?" I asked, but I knew.

I felt the creature's cold presence behind me.

The head vampire.

Before I could even turn, a sinewy arm snaked around my neck and I was pulled back and

pressed against a hard, cold body that felt like a hunk of hanging beef. I felt the vampire's hot stinking breath by my face.

This is it. I'm going to die.

The vampire tore the machete out of my hand and tossed it away. I heard the blade clang against one of the machines before hitting the floor, the sound echoing around the room.

Frank stood, seemingly calm, his torch pointing towards me and my captor. I kept wondering why he wasn't panicking more, as if panicking was going to help me. "Don't hurt her," he said.

He placed his machete on the floor. "Let her go. Take me instead."

"You're in no position to make demands, Watcher," the vampire said in the most guttural and god damned scariest voice I had ever heard, a voice that chilled the blood in my veins. The closeness of it made me

shut my eyes as fear tightened its grip on me. All I could think about was that I was going to die and then I would never be able to save my brother. “You killed my children, so first I’m going to turn this child here, then I’m going to tear you limb from limb, *Watcher*.”

I could see the panic in Frank’s eyes now, even in the dark. Terror gripped me and I felt tears roll down my cheeks. I was screwed, I knew that.

I’m sorry, Josh.

The vampire’s other cold and waxy hand took a hold of my face and turned my head to one side, exposing my neck. I looked up and got a glimpse of the creature’s face. It wasn’t pleasant. You could tell it was human once. It still had the same features of eyes, nose and mouth, but that’s as far as the similarities went. Its skin was a gray blue color, like a corpse under mortuary light. The creature’s eyes were sunk into its face and burned a deep scarlet color. The mouth was massive, that was the worst part for me, knowing that all those teeth were about to chomp down on me and infect me with their virus. “Frank,” I whimpered just before I felt the shock of the vampire’s teeth sinking into my neck. I cried out in pain at first, but after a second my neck went numb as the vampire kept its mouth clamped there, sucking the blood from my carotid artery. My head went light and I slumped down, the creature the only thing holding me up.

Consciousness was slipping away when I heard two loud bangs that caused my body to buck reflexively. I saw two bright flashes of light where Frank was standing. The vampire holding me cried out and the next thing I knew I was released and dropped to the floor. Frank ran past me at that point. I heard him roar some kind of battle cry, then I heard a heavy thudding sound as something hit the floor behind me.

That’s when I blacked out.

The first thing I saw when I came to was a bright light shining in my face. The light moved to the side as I recoiled at the glare. “What…” I started to say.

“It’s okay.” Frank’s voice. “I’m here. You’re going to be fine, don’t worry.”

“You’re alive,” I said, sitting up.

“And you’re not a vampire,” he said. “It’s all good.”

“What happened?” My head was groggy and there was a weird tingling sensation in my neck. I instinctively rubbed my neck and felt a number of small holes there, slightly raised around the edges.

“You were bitten, but you’ll be fine. The head vamp is dead.”

I looked around behind me and saw nothing but a pile of dust on the floor. “Where’s the body?”

“Disintegrated after I killed it. I shot the son of bitch twice in the head after he bit you. That bought me time to get close enough to use the machete. It was a close one, I can tell you that.”

I slowly got to my feet, Frank lending me a hand. “I’m okay, you don’t have to hold me. What about the girl?”

“She’ll be around here somewhere, probably wondering what the hell is happening.”

“She’s not a vamp anymore?”

“Nope. The master is dead. She’ll be normal by now. Let’s find her.”

Frank started to call the girl’s name, his voice echoing around the room. A few moments later the girl appeared around one of the machines. She looked frightened and confused. “What’s going on?” she asked in a small voice.

“It’s okay, honey,” Frank said. “We’re here to take you home to your father.”

“My father?” The girl’s confusion soon turned to tears. “Father...”

I went to the girl and tentatively took her by the hand. She was only sixteen, just a kid. “Come on,” I said as gently as I could. “We’ll take you home.”

We escorted the girl out of the factory and put her in the back of the car. I was never so glad to be out of anywhere in my life. I didn’t even feel like I could breathe properly again until Frank was driving away from the factory, heading uptown to where the senator lived.

I sat in the car while Frank brought the senator his daughter. A gray-haired man dressed in a dark suit, the senator hugged the girl tightly and they both cried on each other’s shoulder. He gave Frank a grateful look, uttered a few words to him, and then carried his daughter into

the house, closing the door behind him.

Frank wearily walked back to the car. “How’s the neck?” he asked.

“Fine as far as I can tell,” I said. I had already checked it out in the mirror. All those holes looked nasty, but it felt like they were healing already, thanks to the Light Energy that I could feel pulsing around the wound.

Frank checked out the scratches on his face in the rear view mirror. “My good looks have been ruined,” he said.

“I think it’s an improvement.” I smiled at him and he gave me a small smile back.

“You did good in there.”

“I almost became a teen vampire. Hardly good.”

“No one said it was easy. Shit happens. You did good anyway.”

I nodded, allowing myself to feel a trickle of victory. Despite nearly getting turned into a vampire, we did manage to save the girl. Now she was home with her father, who clearly loved her very much. That made me feel good, but, a little sad because I didn’t have a father to hug me anymore. But still, I had actually helped save someone’s life and that felt good no matter what.

As Frank drove us back to the cabin, I thought that maybe there was some merit in being a Watcher and I started to see why my mom sacrificed so much in order to do the job.

The question was, what would *I* end up having to sacrifice?

Chapter 11

The next morning I got up late, having spent most of the night fretting over Josh. When I did finally drift off, I dreamed about the vampire that almost turned me into Eddie Munster's big sister at the old factory, but instead of turning me, the vamp ripped my throat out with its teeth in front of Josh and my mom who just stood laughing as blood gushed from my wound. Waking up in a cold sweat, I watched episodes of *Charmed* on the laptop until I was tired enough to sleep again, which was almost dawn.

When I got up, Frank was in the living room reading a book with Bane by his side on the floor.

He made me coffee and I sat with him as I stroked Bane's head. "I never thanked you for saving my life," I said. "Thank you."

Frank just shrugged as he drank his coffee. I got the impression he wasn't good with praise, going by his awkwardness. I'd no doubt he was one of those people who felt they didn't deserve anything good in their lives because of all the bad they thought they'd done. Every day was a process of atonement. "Just doing my job."

"You're good at it. I hope I have your confidence one day."

Frank raised an eyebrow at me. "You planning on staying in the game then?"

It was my turn to shrug. "I don't know. Maybe. Not sure I have much choice."

"There's always a choice. Making the right one, that's the hard part." He looked out the window, regret written all over his face.

"The only choice I have right now is to get Josh back," I said, curling my legs up under me. "I feel like I'm going to fall apart every time I think of him. Have you heard anything yet?" I could feel the now all too familiar anxiety coming back just thinking about my brother.

Frank shook his head. "Not yet, but I'm going to see some people today, find out what they know. Whoever is doing all these kidnappings is keeping a low profile, that's for sure. Either that or people are too afraid to talk."

“You said other Nephilim kids have been taken. Has this ever happened before? What do think it’s about?”

“I’ve never heard of it happening.” He thought for a second. “My guess is some demon is trying to weaken our ranks by taking the next generation of Watchers.”

“But wouldn’t they just kill them instead? Why kidnap them? They must be being used for something messed up.”

“Good point, I suppose.” Frank stood up and brought his empty coffee cup to the kitchen. “One thing’s for sure—if we’re dealing with demons, there’s always something sinister going on.

There’s a plan of some sort.”

I didn’t know how to take that. My anxiety increased as I fretted about Josh being used for some nefarious purpose. “It’s been four days now, Frank.” As much as I tried, I couldn’t keep the emotion out of my voice. “It just feels like we’re doing nothing. Josh might even be…” I trailed off as tears rolled down my face. I was tiring of the constant emotional turmoil, sick of crying all the time.

Frank stood in the kitchen, his arms folded, unsure of how to handle my emotional leakage.

“Look, if the demons took your brother they took him for a reason, not to kill him. Demons always play the long game, we have that going for us.”

That didn’t make me feel any better. I wiped the tears from my eyes. “I just have to do something soon, Frank, or I’m going to crack up. Somebody must know something, for Christ’s sake.”

He came walking over to me, put a hand on my shoulder—an awkward gesture. “I’m going

around to all my contacts with this. Something will turn up soon, it always does. Trust me.”

I nodded. “I hope you’re right.”

When Frank left, I stayed behind at the cabin with Bane. I sat around for a while, reading through some of the books Frank had piled on shelves in the living room. In one book I read up on the history of the

Nephilim. I was still trying to get my head around the fact that I was only half-human. I always knew I was different, but not that different.

Apparently the Nephilim were the offspring of the original Fallen Angels, a result of the angels having their way with human women at the time. The kids they had became giants—literally, some of them reaching thirty-feet tall—going on to become fierce warriors in the war against evil. I'd already come across this story a few years ago while I was researching the occult. It was part of the Old Testament in The Bible. But the book I read of Frank's went into more detail. The Nephilim were a pretty wild bunch apparently, basically doing whatever they wanted. Some of them became as bad as the demons and monsters they were supposed to be keeping in line. This is one reason why God purportedly decided to flood the earth, to cleanse it of the evil that had taken hold, including the Nephilim.

After the flood, an Archangel called Samuel, foreseeing the return of evil, went back down to earth to regenerate the Nephilim bloodlines. God and the rest of the angels were not happy about this, so Samuel was locked out of Heaven forever. On Earth, the angels mated with human women, creating a new breed of Nephilim, ones who were not giants but human in appearance.

Samuel also made sure they didn't get any of their powers until they turned eighteen and became adults, old enough and mature enough to handle the abilities he gave them. He led the Nephilim soldiers for centuries, fighting against the evil that sprung up in Babylon, Samaria, Egypt, and even Atlantis. According to the book I read, Samuel sunk Atlantis when it became irredeemably corrupted by evil and the demons who had taken it over. Just like God saved Noah and his family in the original flood, Samuel saved a handful of people from Atlantis, bringing them to a small island in the Northern hemisphere that eventually became Ireland, from which the population spread, along with the Nephilim.

According to the book, Samuel disappeared after that. No one had heard of him since, but his progeny, the Nephilim still carry on his bloodline, fighting evil to this day.

It was crazy to think I was a part of such a dramatic history, that I had the blood and DNA of an Archangel in my veins. If I hadn't seen and felt the power of the Light Energy myself, I doubt I would have believed any of it.

When I'd had enough reading, I went outside and spent the next three

hours training because I didn't know what else to do with myself. I spent over an hour on the heavy bag (Frank having rehung it after my breaking it from the branch), practicing using and controlling the Light Energy, almost getting to the point where I could summon it at will. After that I got the two short swords and practiced with them before going around the back of the cabin and spending some time shooting at targets with the Glock. I was surprised how comfortable I became holding the gun. I wasn't a bad shot either. I could hit center mass every time from forty yards by the time I had finished practicing.

When I had emptied the last clip I looked up to the sky. "Well, Samuel," I said in a gruff voice.

"Am I not worthy?" When I got no answer I said, "Never seen Gladiator, huh?" I shook my head and went inside to take a shower.

It was mid afternoon when I decided to take Bane into the woods for a walk. As soon I

mentioned the idea to him, he got excited, jumping around like he had just snorted a huge line of doggy cocaine until I opened the door and he sprinted out of the cabin towards the trees. I found a yellow legal pad and pencil in Frank's living room which I took with me so I could do some sketching. I was trying to keep myself occupied; otherwise I'd end up worrying over Josh again.

Outside it was brisk, so I wore one of my mom's leather jackets, dark jeans, and combat boots. I loved the boots; they were so comfortable and as strange as it may sound, I felt I was carrying a part of my mom around with me, like I was literally walking in her shoes. Silly, but I took all the comfort I could get.

I found the woods to be incredibly peaceful. The trees gave off a calming energy, made me feel good for a while. Bane loved it, running through the undergrowth, picking up the scent of rabbits and following the trails, his tail wagging like mad, his ears pricking up every time he spotted a rabbit or squirrel. I was growing attached to the dog. I never had a pet before, not with moving around so much growing up. Bane was showing me what I missed.

When I came across a clearing in the trees, I sat down on a fallen log and started sketching on the legal pad, doing a head shot of Bane first, even though he refused to sit still while I sketched.

Eventually, I told him to go play and he ran off again while I drew a

rough portrait of my brother. I didn't have any photographs of him since I left Diane's, so the sketch was a way of reconnecting with him. It didn't take me long, as I knew every detail of his face—the near permanent scowl, his brown eyes, the tiny scar above his right eye that he got fighting when we were kids, his full lips and high cheek bones. When I finished, my smile soon gave way to tears as I sat staring at the portrait, wondering if I would ever see him again.

Bane must have heard me crying because he came walking out of the bushes and sat beside me, putting his big head in my lap until I smiled again and he licked my face. "If only I had had you growing up," I said, hugging him tightly. "Come on, let's get back." Tearing the page from the pad, I folded it up and shoved the portrait of Josh in my back pocket.

Twilight descended as I walked back through the woods. I stopped when I heard a noise off to my right. It sounded like a twig breaking, like something or someone had stepped on it. I listened for a moment, but heard nothing more, shook my head, and carried on walking, Bane pottering about up ahead.

The next time I stopped, it was because of Bane. He was ten yards ahead of me and I could hear him growling. I looked through the trees in the fading light and saw the dog standing, his head up high, his ears pricked, growling as he looked off to my right. "What is it, boy?" I said when I got near him. The dog looked at me and then back to whatever he was growling at. I frowned in the direction he was staring. All I could see were trees and the shadows in between. "There's nothing there, Bane."

Bane wasn't convinced. He kept growling, occasionally barking, forcing me to look harder.

When I did, my heart leapt when I made out a pair of red eyes in the shadows between the trees.

It was no trick of the light. I instantly wished I had taken along a weapon, but I hadn't, so I told Bane to come along and I quickly walked through the trees again. If there was a demon or some other monster in the woods with me, I wasn't about to hang around and ask what it wanted. My goal at that point was to get back to the cabin and arm myself to the teeth.

I practically ran as I got near the end of the woods. I could see the cabin in the distance and I prematurely allowed myself to feel safe

when a dark figure suddenly appeared in front of me. I squealed, recoiling back and tripping over a dead branch, landing with a hard thump flat on my ass.

The figure in front of me laughed. “Didn’t mean to scare you, Leia.”

It was a woman’s voice and it dripped with unconcealed scorn and sarcasm. I scrambled back and got to my feet. “Who are you? What do you want?” I looked around for Bane. I couldn’t see him anywhere.

The woman stepped forward. She was young, beautiful with long dark hair and the fullest lips I had ever seen. Only her glowing red eyes gave her away as a demon. “Come on, Leia. I think you know what I am. I also think you know why I’m here.”

I stood tensely, willing the Light Energy to flow in me. “You demon assholes took my brother.

What have you done with him?”

“Don’t worry about Josh.” Her voice was coldly matter of fact. “He’s being taken good care of.

He’s one of us now. It’s you the boss really wants, though.”

One of us? What did she mean by that? That Josh was part of the gang or that he was a demon?

“What do you mean he’s one of you?”

The demon smiled like she was enjoying my fear and confusion. “Oh honey, you’ll find out soon enough what I mean. After you come along with me.”

“What do you want with me?” The Light Energy beat strongly, giving me confidence, easing some of the fear I felt. If the demon bitch came any closer, I decided, she was getting it.

“I ask myself the same thing,” the demon said in a scathing tone. “Why is the boss bothering with a bunch of whiny little Nephilim kids? I mean, are his own progeny not good enough?” She stood as if waiting for me to answer. When I said nothing, she shook her head in disdain. “Orders are orders, I guess. You’re coming with us, you little bitch.”

“Us?” I looked around and saw no one else.

“I brought company.” Just then two more demons appeared, two men, standing either side of the woman. They both regarded me with dark, serious faces, red eyes glowering at me. Whatever confidence I had quickly faded when the other two came on the scene. “There’ll be no getting away this time.” *Shit, shit, shit.* “Bring her to me.”

The two demon lackeys came towards me. I thought about running.

What good would it do? They’ll just teleport themselves right in front of me as they had a habit of doing.

I’d have to fight my way past them so I could get to the cabin, a prospect I wasn’t looking forward to. If I got inside the cabin though, I’d be safe. Frank had the place warded against demons. There were magic symbols carved into the outside of the cabin, specifically designed to repel any demon who might want to enter.

The Light Energy pulsated, strained inside of me. I’d never felt so on edge as the two demons seemed to take an age to get close to me. One of them was slightly closer than the other, so that’s who I hit first, sending my fist flying towards his chest. The demon was caught unawares. I don’t think they expected me to fight back. My fist connected with his chest and white light exploded, sending the demon flying back about six feet into the trees.

It worked!

The other demon grabbed my arm tight before I could turn to face him so I leant forward and kicked back, hitting him in the stomach, forcing him to release my arm, then I turned and hit him square in the face, hearing his nose crack beneath my fist. I was about to hit him again when I felt two incredibly strong arms wrap themselves around me like steel bands. “You’ve been training,” the woman demon said as she held me without effort, despite my attempts to struggle out of her grip. “Though obviously not enough. Time to go.”

Just then I heard something come crashing through a patch of scrub and I saw Bane, his teeth bared, a deep growl in his throat. I leaned to the side as the big dog launched himself into the air, crashing into the demon who held me. The demon cried out in surprise and her arms fell from me as Bane crashed down on top of her, snarling and biting at her face and throat.

I didn’t waste time. I ran for the cabin.

I was almost near the front door when I heard a loud high pitched cry

and I skidded to a halt and looked round.

No.

It was Bane who made the cry. The woman demon stood by the edge of the woods, holding Bane by the throat with one hand as the dog bucked wildly in her grip. The demon smiled at me as she plunged her hand into the dog's stomach and pulled all its intestines out. "No!" I cried.

The bitch tossed the dog away like a sack of rubbish and I turned and ran into the cabin before the demon could teleport anywhere near me. I slammed the door, tears streaming down my face, the horror of seeing Bane's death causing bile to rise in my stomach.

I jumped at a loud thump on the front door. "You can't hide in there forever, Leia," the woman demon sang from outside. "We'll be waiting for you when you come out." Another loud thump on the door and then silence. I stood with my back to the door, breathing hard, my face wet with tears.

Keep it together, Leia.

I ran to my bedroom and took one of the Glocks from the bag, along with the demon killing knife, then I ran back to the living room and stood and listened, trying to control my breathing, gun in one hand, knife in the other.

I couldn't hear anything except my own heart pounding. I stood for a long time listening before I moved through the rest of the cabin, looking out the windows, seeing nothing but darkness and my own scared reflection in the glass.

Then I heard a car pull up outside.

Frank.

I ran to the living room. Taking no chances, I aimed the Glock at the front door.

"What the hell?" Frank said as he came through the door, stopping when he saw I had a gun trained on him.

"Frank." I lowered the gun and breathed a sigh of relief as I ran towards him and threw my arms around him.

Frank stood stiffly for a moment while I gripped him tight before prying me off of him, holding my arms. “Leia, what’s happened? Tell me.”

“Demons were here,” I said in a strained voice. “In the woods. Three of them.”

Frank let go of me and went to the window. “When?”

“Not long ago. I managed to get away, make it back here.”

“Did they hurt you?”

I shook my head.

He looked around the cabin. “Where’s Bane?”

My bottom lip quivered as I stared at him, unable to bring myself to tell him his dog was dead.

But I didn’t have to. He knew by my expression that something had happened. “God damn it!”

he said.

“I’m sorry.”

Frank went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of bourbon. “What happened?” His voice was tense as he tried to keep himself in check.

“He saved me, Frank. The demon, it had me and Bane just jumped on it so I could get away. Oh God…” I had a hand to my mouth as an image of the demon disemboweling Bane flashed in my mind. “I’m sorry. There was nothing I could do.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said, pouring himself another drink.

“It is though. I brought the demons here. They’re after me for some… fucking reason, I don’t know why. I’ll leave now before they come back.” I went to walk to the bedroom to get my stuff.

“Hey, hey,” Frank said as he rushed after me, grabbing me gently by the arm. “What are you talking about? I don’t want you to leave. I said I’d help you, remember?”

“But I’ve been nothing but trouble since I got here.” I was blubbering

now, despite myself.

Frank pulled me to him and held me in his arms. “You’ve just had a scare, that’s all. You’re in shock. Take a drink, calm yourself down.” He guided me to the kitchen where he poured me a bourbon, which I only took a sip of before cradling the glass in my hands, staring at the amber liquid within like it was going to reveal the answers to all my problems.

“The demon mentioned Josh,” I said when I’d gotten a hold of myself. “Said he was being taken care of and that he was one of them now, whatever that meant.”

“It said that?”

“Yeah, any idea what it means? Have they brainwashed him or something?”

Frank shook his head. “I dunno.”

“At least that means he’s alive, right?”

He nodded. “I’ve been asking around all day. No one knows anything, or if they do, they aren’t saying, which I think is more the case. Whoever has Josh and the others have really put the squeeze on the demon fraternity in the city. Whatever plans are afoot, they don’t want them known.”

“So we’re no further along then?”

“I still have one more contact. If anyone knows what’s happening, it’ll be him. You can come with me tomorrow while I meet him.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Frank drained his glass, slammed it on the work top. “What they do with my dog?”

“He’s by the edge of the trees. You’re not going out there, are you?”

“Damned right I am. I’m going to get my dog.” He walked past me, grim faced.

“What if the demons are still there?”

Frank paused by the front door, cold aggression in his eyes. He could barely contain his anger.

“Then I’ll kill them,” he said before slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 12

After another restless night's sleep, I awoke to find Frank out the back of the cabin. He was digging a hole in the ground near the edge of the pine trees—a grave. Beside him was Bane's body wrapped in a blanket. I went out just as Frank was lowering him into the hole. "Sons a bitches," he said as we stood looking down at the bundle in the earth. "I loved that dog."

I placed a hand on his arm. "I know. I'm sorry."

"He really saved you, huh?"

"He did. He was really brave."

Frank's eyes watered. "He took on a werewolf once, you know."

"A werewolf?"

He nodded. "He didn't fight it or anything. The thing stalked the woods here for weeks.

Normally I wouldn't bother, but it kept getting closer to the cabin. I couldn't have that so I went looking for it one night. It surprised me and I dropped my gun. Bane kept it busy until I found my gun again and I shot it with a silver bullet. Bane was practically still a pup back then. No fear in him."

I had only known the dog a few days, but I felt the loss like I had known him all my life "I'll leave you to it."

He didn't answer as I walked away, just kept staring down into the grave like he expected Bane to wake up any second and go bounding off through the trees like he always did.

"When are we going to see this contact of yours?" I asked Frank about an hour later. We sat at the breakfast bar in the kitchen eating bacon and eggs. Frank was distant since he got back from burying Bane in the woods. He hadn't said much. The question was as much an attempt to break the silence as it was about prompting him for information.

"Yeah, about that," he said, chewing on a piece of bacon. "I got a call late last night about a case I've been working on for the past year. I've

been chasing a demon serial killer who likes to kill street kids. The thing is, I've always been one step behind him. Every time I get close he changes location. So last night I get a call telling me the demon son of a bitch is holed up in some abandoned building in the city."

"So let me guess. You want to hunt this demon first?"

"It's the first time I've gotten this close. You don't have to come. You can just meet me later."

I shook my head. "No way. I'm not staying here alone all day. I'm coming with."

"This demon is dangerous."

"Don't care. And anyway, I'm supposed to be this Watcher now, right? Isn't that what Watchers do, put themselves in dangerous situations for the good of all humanity?"

Frank laughed. "Yeah, something like that."

"Besides," I popped a final piece of bacon into my mouth. "I'll need the practice if we're going to take on the demons who took Josh." I sounded more confident than I felt. The vampire episode still had me shaken up. I put it down to post traumatic stress or something. It would pass, I was sure.

"Alright. You wash up while I gear up."

"I'm a guest here, you know," I called after him. "Guests don't do the washing up."

"You're not a guest anymore," he called back over his shoulder. "Meet me in the cellar when you're done."

A small smile appeared on my lips. It was stupid, but his comment made me feel kind of good.

As someone who had never felt like they belonged anywhere in eleven years, it was nice to hear that I was part of the furniture, even if it was temporary. And Frank was my real family, not some foster parent who wanted a government handout and didn't give a shit about me at the end of the day. For the time being, I was as at home as I was going to get.

The cellar entrance was at the end of the hallway where the bedrooms

and the bathroom was. I hadn't been down there yet since it was always locked. When I went down the stairs into the cold cellar, I gave a tight laugh. "Oh my God," I said. "Did you and my mom share the same designer or what?"

The cellar was Frank's equivalent of my mom's lockup. There were weapons hanging from the walls, the same glass jars with weird stuff in them scattered along over a bench that ran along the back wall as well as stacks of dusty books piled all over the floor. The only thing that was different was the large pentagram painted in the middle of the floor. "What's this about?" I asked.

"It's a demon trap," he said as he loaded bullets into a mag clip.

"And why would you want to trap a demon?"

"Sometimes we summon them if we need to talk to them."

"And they come willingly?"

"Not exactly. They don't have a choice. If they're summoned, they have to come. The stronger demons can resist it."

"And all those jars with the weird shit in them, what are they for?"

"Spells. They're ingredients."

"My mom's lockup is full of them."

"I know. She has some rare stuff in there."

Doesn't surprise me at all.

"What do we need to kill this demon then? And have you tried summoning it?"

"No," he said sarcastically.

"Okay, stupid question. So what'll I need for this mission?"

"Your knife and swords. No gun. You need more training with that. I don't want you shooting me by accident."

"As if that would happen."

"You wouldn't be the first. Go get your stuff and meet me outside."

I turned to walk away, then stopped. “Why’d you ask me down here in the first place?”

“Oh yeah. Here.” He took a knife from off the bench and handed it to me.

“I already have one of these. My mom’s.”

“This one belonged to your dad.”

I looked at the knife. It was virtually identical to the one that belonged to my mom except for the initials DS carved into the bone handle—Dean Swanson. “Why do you have this?”

“I took it from his study after he died… something to remember him by, I suppose.” He turned away from me and started cleaning one of his guns on the bench.

“You went to the house?”

“I had to check it out, see what happened.”

I was silent for a moment. “You never did tell me why you and my dad stopped speaking. What happened there?”

He cleared his throat. “It was a personal thing.”

“That’s it? That’s all your going to say, it was a personal thing?” He kept his back to me, saying nothing while I waited for answers that clearly weren’t coming. “It’s not good to keep secrets, Frank.”

“It was between me and your dad,” he said, irritated. “It doesn’t concern you.”

I scowled and pursed my lips together like a kid who’d just been denied her favorite toy. Maybe it wasn’t any of my business, but I was still pissed off with his attitude. “Whatever.”

I left the cellar and went to my room to get geared up, forcing myself to take deep breaths and forget about what just happened in the cellar, at the same time resolving that I wasn’t going to let it go that easily. Today we had a demon to hunt and a contact to meet about Josh’s kidnapping. It wouldn’t be good to let animosity cloud my judgment so I just got changed into black leggings, combat boots, black leather jacket and T-shirt. I also attached a knife holder to my ankle that I got from the lockup, sliding my dad’s knife in. It fit

perfectly. The jacket I wore was custom tailored so it would hold the short swords. I slid one sword in each side of the jacket before looking in the mirror. You wouldn't even know the swords were there. "Let's do this," I said to my reflection and went and met Frank in the car outside.

Frank was quiet on the drive into the city and I figured it had something to do with me asking him about him and my dad. He remained stone-faced as he drove, the radio playing classic seventies rock in the background. I stared out the window, awkward in the tense silence.

"I wasn't trying to piss you off earlier," I said when I couldn't take it anymore. Frank glanced at me briefly and then fixed his attention out the window again as he drove us into the city. "It's just that I thought I knew my parents, I thought I knew where I came from. Now it turns out I didn't know them at all."

"I get it," he said, slowing for a red light.

"Then why do you get so defensive when I ask you about stuff concerning my parents?"

"It's complicated."

I waited for him to say more, but instead he stared straight ahead, anxiously waiting on the light to change. I shook my head. "That's all you're going to say?"

"Jesus, Leia." He took his hands off the steering wheel in a gesture of frustration. "This is isn't exactly easy for me either. I mean, you come along, dragging up all this stuff from the past…"

He stopped, shook his head. "It's just hard for me…" He started driving again, angrily sounding the horn at a taxi cab that pulled out in front of us. "Asshole!"

I didn't know what to make of his behavior. He looked pained, like he was having trouble dealing with things related to whatever past he shared with my parents. I knew he felt guilty about what happened to my mom. Did he feel guilty about my dad's death as well? After all, if my mom hadn't sold her soul to save him, my dad would also still be alive. So he had two deaths on his conscience.

There was something else though, something eating away at him. I

wanted to push him on it, find out the source of his pain and evident guilt, but at the same time, I hardly knew him and I wasn't sure if I had the right to go poking around inside his head. I figured if I pushed him any further, he would ditch me and I still needed his help to get Josh back. I couldn't afford to alienate him just so I could satisfy my desire to know the truth.

"You know what, Frank?" I said. "You're right. I'm just being pushy. It's none of my business what happened. I won't ask again."

The tormented expression never left his face as he kept driving. It seemed even me backing down wasn't enough to alleviate whatever he felt. We drove in silence for the next ten minutes until he eventually took us down a side street and parked the car outside an abandoned building that I recognized immediately. "I know this building," I said, looking out the window. "My friend Kasey lives in there."

"In there? How could anyone live in there?"

"She lives on the streets. Sleeps in there most nights though."

"Well, that's where our demon is holed up. The basement to be precise."

I remembered something. "Holy shit."

"What?"

"Kasey was just telling me the other day about the screams she heard in the basement."

"She heard screaming in the basement?" Frank nodded to himself. "Makes sense. My source told me that's where our guy hangs out."

I thought for a moment. "But Kasey is probably in there now. Will she be in danger?"

"I dunno. Maybe. I wouldn't chance it where demons are concerned."

"Shit. We'll have to get her out."

"You mean *you'll* have to get her out."

"Yeah, whatever." That's even if she was in there. I hoped she was out hustling somewhere, far away from the demon that building. If she was in there I'd have to try and persuade her to leave, which wouldn't

be easy since I knew Kasey would ask me a million questions about what I was doing there. Plus, I hadn't seen her since before everything happened with Diane and Josh. She would have heard stories on the news. I'd have to try and explain that as well. "I'll do my best."

We got out of the car and Frank popped the trunk, took out two flashlights, a Glock, and a knife.

He handed me a flashlight. "Gonna be dark down there." He put the gun in his waistband and the knife in his black corduroy coat.

The building was surrounded by plywood sheeting to keep people out. I took him to the place where there was a loose board—the spot where Kasey got in and out of the building. We

squeezed through the gap and made our way into the building. "Kasey is on the third floor," I said, and Frank followed me up the two flights of stairs. "This way." I walked down the hallway to the empty apartment that Kasey called home most nights, wrinkling my nose at the musty smell, my boots sticking to the grimy floor. "Kasey? It's Leia, you in there?" I said when I knocked on the door.

The door opened immediately and there was Kasey, still dressed in the same clothes as the last time I'd seen her. She looked deathly pale, even more than usual. "Leia, what the fuck?" Kasey said. "I can't believe you're here." She came forward and threw her arms around me.

"Hi." I looked at Frank, who stood to the side of the door, stone-faced as usual.

"I thought you were dead," Kasey said, hugging me tight.

I squeezed her back. "I'm fine, really."

She let go of me. "I heard about Diane. It's all over the news. The cops are looking for you and Josh. What the hell happened?" Just then she noticed Frank. "Who the hell is this? You a cop or something?" She stepped back into the room as if to get distance from him.

"Nope," Frank said, looking bored by the whole exchange.

"Kasey, this is Frank. My… uncle."

"Your uncle?" Kasey didn't seem convinced. "When did you get a fucking uncle?"

“I’ll be down the hall,” Frank said, walking away.

I walked into the room with Kasey, my nose trying to contend with the rank smell in the place. “I don’t really have time to explain everything, but I need you to leave here for a while.”

Kasey frowned. “What? What for? What’s going on, Leia?”

How am I supposed to explain this?

“It’s complicated. I just need you to trust me on this. You have to get out of here, for your own safety.”

Her frown deepened as she shook her head. “But why? What’s going on with you? And is that guy really your uncle? You said you didn’t have any family.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “Turns out I have an uncle. I know this must all seem really weird, but he’s helping me out. Josh is missing.”

“According to the news you both are. Did you kill your foster mom?”

“Fuck, Kasey, I can’t believe you just said that. Of course I didn’t. Neither did Josh.”

“Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say.” She sat on a grubby mattress that was covered by a few scratchy looking sheets. There was a bottle of water on the floor, which she lifted and drank from. “I’ve got the flu. I’m dying here.”

I knew she was ill. The cold weather is not your friend when you live rough. “A lot’s happened lately. I don’t have time to explain it all but that man out there—my Uncle Frank—he’s helping me get Josh back.”

“What the hell happened? Where’s Josh?”

“Some bad people have kidnapped him.” I could hardly tell her demons took my brother. Even Kasey wouldn’t accept that one.

“Why though?”

“Something to do with his weed dealing. I think he owed the wrong people.” Not great, but it was the best I could come up with that was even halfway plausible sounding.

“Okay. So what are you doing here?”

Good question.

“Eh, we got a lead that Josh may be being held in the basement of this building.” I hated lying to her. She was my best friend, but what was I supposed to say? That there’s a demon serial killer in the basement?

Kasey looked like she was struggling to believe me. “That’s fucking crazy. Why down there of all places?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. You can see why I want you to leave for a while though, right? It might not be safe here.”

Kasey flopped back onto the bed, a sheen of sweat covering her face and neck. She didn’t look well at all. “I knew there was something going on down there. Remember I told you about the screams? They must be torturing people or something. You really think Josh is down there?”

“We’ll see.”

“Why not tell the cops, let them sort it out?”

“Come on, Kase. You, better than anyone know how cops are. They’d just think I had something to do with Diane’s murder. Better to keep the cops out of it.”

She nodded. “I’m with you on that one. Cops are useless assholes.” She coughed suddenly, her chest heaving as she lay on the mattress. “Oh god…”

I went and sat beside her. “You’re really sick, huh?”

“Yep, as a fucking dog, man.” Snot was running from her nose and she wiped it away with her sleeve and sniffed heavily. “I ain’t going anywhere. Just come see me when you’re done.”

I squeezed her leg and stood. “Alright. Just keep an ear out for trouble, okay?”

“I always do,” she said, too weak to even smile.

“When I come back, I’m getting you to a doctor.”

“Fuck that, man. No doctors. It’s just the flu.”

“People die from the flu.”

“Whatever.” She lay back and closed her eyes. I knelt down and fixed the blankets over her, wishing I could stay and look after her.

“I’ll come back,” I told her as I moved towards the door.

“Princess?”

“Yeah?”

“Nice outfit.”

I smiled and shook my head and left her in the cold, damp room, worried already that something was going to happen to her. She was on the third floor; the demon was supposedly in the basement.

She would be fine.

“I take it she ain’t leaving?” Frank said when I met him in the hallway again.

“She’s sick. She can hardly move, poor thing.”

Frank didn’t look too concerned. “Nothing we can do then. Let’s go.”

A few moments later we reached the basement stairs and I followed Frank down. It was colder than the rest of the building and I shivered when I got to the bottom of the stairs, as much from fear as from the temperature. The vampire incident was still fresh in my mind and I couldn’t help worrying that I’d end up in a similar situation again, only this time with a crazy demon who would probably kill me straight off.

Frank lowered his voice. “Stay sharp. Don’t hesitate to kill this thing if you get the chance. Stay close to me at all times.”

He sounded concerned. Maybe he didn’t want any more family deaths on his conscience. I

nodded and took out my knife—the one that used to belong to my dad—and gripped it tightly, taking scant comfort in the fact that at least a part of my dad was with me in some way. That’s what I told myself anyway.

We ended up in a room that smelled like a sewer, water dripping off the ceiling and from leaky old pipes along the walls, making the floor wet and slippery. Frank led the way, flashlight in one hand, gun in the other. I followed behind him, shining my own flashlight around the

room. One thing I didn't mention to Frank was that I suffered from claustrophobia on occasion. In one of my first foster homes, the man of the house used to lock me up in a closet any time I did wrong in his eyes, which was all too often. He would leave me there for hours sometimes, in a small space with little air, cloaked in total darkness. It used to terrify me, to the point that I'd never gotten over it.

The basement, with its low ceiling and almost total darkness, brought those past feelings back.

My chest tightened, my throat constricted, making it hard for me to breathe. I had to resist the urge to panic, to run back out again. The only thing that was tempering the panic was the Light Energy that pulsed in me, but not by much. Frank must have sensed my unease because he

turned and shone the light on me. "You alright?"

"Fine," I said, nodding, trying to sound strong, not sure if I succeeded. I shook my head at my own weakness when Frank shone the light ahead of him again.

What kind of Watcher has claustrophobia?

Up ahead, the room narrowed into a corridor. It was all I could do to control my breathing as I moved along behind Frank in the confined space, darkness all around except for the thin beams of the flashlights. The smell in the air was getting worse as well. Like dead animals mixed with the now familiar sulfur smell.

Are there bodies down here?

Our footsteps sounded loud on the wet floor. We both froze when I kicked a piece of metal on the ground, making a loud clanging noise. I gritted my teeth, sure that I had now alerted the demon to our presence.

Fuck.

Frank glared at me for a second and then kept walking until we came out of the narrow entry and into another room, this one bigger than the last. The ceiling was the same height, but the room was wider, longer.

I almost walked into Frank when he stopped dead in front of me. "What?" I whispered urgently.

Frank shone his flashlight out into the room and I gasped when I saw what was in there. A few feet away, a body hung from the ceiling, some sort of meat hook in its back, the hook attached to a chain that hung from the ceiling.

Jesus.

I counted six different bodies suspended from the ceiling.

And that wasn't even the worst of it.

Every body was horribly mutilated, cut open from chest to groin, the insides pulled out, bits of intestine still dangling from the cavities. The sight of the corpses hanging there almost motionless, in combination with the atrocious smell, made my stomach heave and I turned and vomited, the bile in my stomach hitting the wet floor with a loud slapping sound. I did my best to be quiet about it, but it was hard to be sick and quiet at the same time.

I stood, breathing heavily, and wiped my mouth with my sleeve. I shook my head apologetically at Frank, who gave me a pained expression, knowing there was nothing we could do now. If the demon didn't know we were there before, it did now. "Fuck it," he said, raising his gun.

"Alright, demon, you know we're here, we know you're here. Show yourself!"

Almost recovered from my vomiting, I moved along with Frank into the room, knife held out in front as I tried not to touch any of the hanging bodies around me. I shone the flashlight to the back of the room, looking for signs of the demon and seeing none.

Maybe it isn't here after all. Maybe Frank's intell was wrong.

I hoped it was wrong.

"Come on, demon," Frank said, his voice loud and booming in the confined space of the

basement. "No point in hiding. We'll find you eventually. Come out now, get it over with."

There was no answer, but I could see what Frank was trying to do. He was attempting to goad the demon into showing itself, though it wasn't working so far.

I spotted a large metal table at the back of the room. Pointing the flashlight I walked over to it to see another body splayed out naked and eviscerated on the cold steel. It was the body of a young boy, no more than sixteen. The face was frozen in a wide-eyed expression of terror. As grossly distorted as the face of the boy was, I still recognized him as the one who had run into Josh's car a few days ago, which meant that the other boy who was chasing him at the time had to be the demon.

I was about to tell Frank about this when something caught my eye, up high in the corner of the room. Frowning, I shone the flashlight up towards the ceiling and was startled to see someone hanging there upside down, two shiny obsidian eyes glaring back at me. "Frank!" I shouted, keeping my torch beam trained on the demon who still hung from the ceiling like a huge spider.

Frank fired his gun at the demon, getting off two shots as the demon leapt back like some grotesque monkey and landed on the floor in a crouch. I did my best to keep the light on it so Frank could see. I shone the flashlight directly in the demon's face. It was indeed the kid from the other day, still dressed in the same scruffy clothes. His young face should have been innocent looking, but the demon inside him contorted his features so much that he just looked monstrous and nasty as hell. The dried blood around his mouth only added to the sadistic killing machine look, which was probably all the rage in the demon world. Clearly possessing the body of a kid made the demon's job easier when it came to luring other kids to their deaths.

Before the demon could move again Frank fired three shots into it, one hitting it square on the forehead, sending it reeling back. I ran forward, planning on sticking it with my knife, but as I did I heard a loud screeching sound and in the beams of the flashlights I saw the demon on the floor, seemingly dead. Then the body of the young boy arched up and out of his mouth came a thick cloud of black smoke that trailed into the room.

What the hell is that about?

"Shit!" Frank said. "No!"

"What?" I asked in a panic.

"It jumped out of the meat suit. Motherfucker!"

Meat suit?

I assumed he was referring to the demon's human host. The black smoke must have been the spirit of the demon. "What does that mean?"

"It means it will jump into the next body it finds and get away. Come on."

"Why not one of us?"

"They can't possess Nephilim. Let's go!"

I ran after Frank, almost bumping into one of the hanging bodies, my head way too close to an exposed stomach cavity. I dodged around it and kept running after Frank as he rushed up the narrow corridor and out into the other room. It wasn't until I got to the stairs that the meaning of what he just said hit me.

It will jump into the next body it finds.

Kasey!

I sprinted up the stairs. Frank was already at the top, looking around for signs of the demon. "I'm going to check on Kasey," I said, rushing past him.

"Wait!" Frank shouted, but I was already running up the stairs, heading for the third floor, taking the steps two at a time, dropping the flashlight on the way up but retaining the knife in my other hand. It didn't take me long to get to the third floor. As I ran down the hallway, Kasey came walking out the door ten yards ahead of me. I stopped running. "Kasey, are you alright?"

Kasey walked towards me, a bit too casually I thought, but otherwise she seemed normal. "I'm fine," she said. "I just heard gunshots. What's going on? What's with the knife?"

I stood, looked hard at her, but I saw no sign that she had been possessed. No flickering face or demon eyes. "Everything's fine. You need to go back inside now."

"Okay." Kasey made to go back into the room, but Frank's voice made her stop.

"Get away from her!" Frank shouted as he moved down the hallway with his gun pointed at Kasey.

“Frank, it’s okay” I said, instinctively walking in front of Kasey as if to shield her.

“You don’t know that. Move away from her. It could be hiding its true form.”

I didn’t even know demons could do that.

I looked at Kasey again and was shocked to see that her eyes had turned coal black.

I jumped away from her and Kasey ran back into the apartment. Despite Frank’s protestations, I went in after her. She stood in the middle of the room, her eyes black as tar and a menacing smile on her face. “Stupid little bitch!” she said—or rather the demon inside her said. “Let me go or I rip your friend apart from the inside out. Throw me the knife now.”

I jumped when the door slammed shut behind me.

Did the demon do that?

A second later, Frank was banging on the door.

I held my hands up, the knife still in one hand. “Don’t hurt her, please,” I said.

“Throw me the knife.”

“Just take me instead. Let her be.”

The demon cocked its head at me. “Are you as dumb as you look? Demons can’t possess

Nephilim. The knife!”

I shook my head. “No.”

The demon looked perplexed. “No?”

I walked towards it. “No. Kasey, I know you’re in there. You have to fight this thing. Force it out.”

The demon just laughed in Kasey’s voice, but in a way that Kasey had never done. “You really know nothing, don’t you? That can’t happen. Don’t come any closer!”

I stopped, and two gunshots resounded behind me.

The door burst open. Frank stood with his gun raised. “Kill that thing!” he said.

“But I’ll kill Kasey!”

“She’s dead anyway. Kill it now or I will!”

Dead anyway? That can’t be.

“He’s right,” the demon said. “No human ever survives a possession, at least not from me.” It started laughing.

“Kill it now!” Frank had his knife out. He was walking towards the demon who was backing itself into the corner of the room.

“Wait!” I said. With tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat, I moved towards the demon who looked fearfully between me and Frank. I raised my knife, ready to do what had to be done when the demon’s eyes changed back to Kasey’s. She looked at me like an injured dog as she crouched in the corner.

“Please,” she said in a small voice. “Don’t hurt me, Leia. Please.”

“It’s not her,” Frank said. “Do it!”

I stood with the knife raised, about a foot away from Kasey, who cried, pleading with me not to hurt her. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t just stab my best friend.

I lowered the knife.

And that’s when the demon leapt toward me.

Too late, I saw it had a knife in its hand, Kasey’s knife that it must have found in her jacket. She carried it for protection. I felt the blade go into my stomach and then get pulled out again, the demon grinning into my face as I staggered back. I dropped my knife and clutched my belly, blood already pumping profusely from the wound.

The demon rushed past me and attacked Frank with the knife as I fell back onto the mattress.

Frank blocked the knife swing from the demon and plunged his own knife up under the demon’s chin, burying it to the hilt. Dark orange light burst from the wound as the demon seemed to convulse for a few

seconds like it had been electrocuted, then it took its final breath and dropped to the floor with a heavy thud.

From the mattress all I could see was Kasey's dead body on the floor, her eyes open and looking in my direction. "Kasey…"

I felt ice cold suddenly, like all the heat had gone from my body.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 13

“Where am I?”

My voice sounded strange, like it belonged to someone else. I opened my eyes fully and tried to make out where I was. A room of some sort, brightly lit, green walls, some sort of machine to the right of me. Nothing seemed familiar. An acrid smell assailed also my nostrils.

Antiseptic?

Nothing felt right.

I tried to sit up, but a combination of debilitating pain in my stomach and a weight on my chest prevented me from getting any further. Then I heard a voice right beside me.

“Relax, Leia,” the voice said—a woman’s voice, soothing. “Don’t try to move, you’ve been hurt, you need to lie still.”

I managed to turn my head to the side so I could make out the figure standing beside me. It was a woman with dark hair and large eyes. I felt her hand on my chest, gently pushing me down.

“Where am I?” I mumbled.

“You’re safe. We had to perform surgery. You’re fine now, you just need to rest.”

I had cotton mouth. I kept smacking my lips. “Water…”

“Hold on.”

A moment later I felt a cold glass on my lips and a hand at the back of my head, lifting it up slightly so I could sip the water. I choked on the first sip and the coughing created more pain in my belly.

“Easy, easy…” said the woman. “There we go.” My head rested back on the pillow.

“Where’s… Frank?” I asked.

“I’m here.” Frank’s voice came from within the room. A second later I saw him standing beside the woman in the white coat.

“Frank?” I held out my hand and felt his strong grip.

“You’re safe, Eva will take care of you. She saved your life.” He paused. “You almost died.”

“Died?” Then it hit me all at once, the memory of Kasey and her black eyes, the demon inside of her stabbing me with the knife. The images in my head were vivid and it felt like I was being stabbed all over again. I groaned and arched my back off the bed.

“Easy, easy…” Eva said, her hands on me, holding me down.

“Kasey…”

“Kasey?” Eva asked.

“Her friend,” Frank said. “The demon possessed her. She’s dead.”

It was more than I could take, hearing those words come out of Frank’s mouth. A huge swell of anger and resentment welled up in me and I clawed at frank as I tried to get to him from the bed.

“You fucking killed her!” I screamed “You killed her! You killed Kasey! You didn’t have to kill her…”

Eva was doing her best to get me to lie back down, but I was full of rage; I just wanted to get at Frank so I could rip his eyes out for killing my only friend in the world. I screamed and thrashed until I felt a sharp prick in my leg. Eva had injected me with something. I didn’t care. I continued to scream, not even at Frank anymore, just screaming because I didn’t know what else to do. I spewed rage and sorrow into the room until eventually I had no choice but to slump back into the bed. Whatever Eva had injected me with forced me back into oblivion. “You killed her…” were the last words I remember saying before blacking out.

The next time I awoke, I was more lucid. I opened my eyes to find Frank’s lady friend doing something to the IV drip at the side of my bed. She was strikingly good looking, with large smoky eyes that were a sapphire blue and dark brown hair that fell just past her shoulders. She wasn’t tall, about my height, and her body was slender, which she moved with great composure.

A warm smile spread across her face when she noticed I was awake. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

How was I feeling?

Apart from being numb, which no doubt had to do with whatever medication they had given me, I felt groggy and weighted down by an overwhelming sense of sadness. I remembered screaming at Frank because I blamed him for killing Kasey. Whatever anger I felt towards him had now gone, and in its wake a tsunami of grief, overtaking and smothering everything else that I might have felt. The last time I had felt such pain was when my parents were killed, but I was just a kid then. The hurt went deeper this time, maybe because it was mixed up with everything else I felt about Josh, my mom, and the whole demons and Watcher thing. I hung from a cliff by a thread, a black abyss beneath me that if I fell into I would never escape. I'd be gone forever.

I said nothing to Eva, who smiled her pleasant smile and shone a small light into my eyes. She seemed satisfied and put the little flashlight back in her coat pocket. "I'm glad to see you are pulling through," she said. "You had a lucky escape. You almost bled to death by the time Frank got you here. You're healing power is the only thing that kept you alive until I could repair the damage."

"What damage?"

"The knife you were stabbed with hit an artery in your abdomen. I had to operate and tie it off to stop the bleeding."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Eva," she said. "I'm a friend of your Uncle's. I was also a friend of your mother's."

"Seems like everyone knew my mother except me." Eva didn't know what to say to that so she just smiled tightly. "Where's Frank?" I asked. "And when can I get out of here? Where the hell am I anyway?" I tried to lift myself up again, but Eva rushed forward and held me back down.

"You're not strong enough to be moving around just yet. You need to stay still and rest or you'll rip your internal stitches and that would just be a messy business. We also have to replace the blood you lost. It was a lot."

"Where's Frank?"

"He just popped out. He'll be back."

Eva went back to check my IV drip and glanced briefly at the EKG machine I was hooked up to.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Wait,” I said. For some reason I didn’t like the idea of being left alone.

Eva placed a hand on mine. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back.” She smiled at me, her large almond-shaped eyes caring and detached at the same time. I nodded and she left the room.

Looking around, I had no idea where I was. It was a large room from what I could make out from my position. There seemed to be some sort of laboratory over to the left and all the walls were filled with shelves lined with small glass bottles and jars, each of them containing liquids or powders of some sort. To the other side was a wall filled with books, similar to the books Frank had back at the cabin and the ones I found in my mom’s lockup.

Was this Eva woman a Watcher too?

Most likely, I decided. Given Frank’s commitment to the cause, I doubted he associated with anyone who wasn’t involved in some way. And she had said she knew my mother. I would have to press her further on that.

Looking down, I could see under the sheets that covered me that I was wearing a surgical gown.

I peeled back the sheets and pulled up the gown so I could assess the damage. Apart from the dried blood and iodine, all I saw was a large bandage that covered the wound.

“Ah-ah,” Eva said when she came back into the room. “Don’t touch.” She put the gown back over me and then the sheets.

“Are you a doctor?” I asked.

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve had medical training, just not in the way most doctors have. As a Watcher, I was trained elsewhere. Our bodies work slightly differently compared to humans.”

Compared to humans. I was still getting used to the fact that I was something other than human.

“How do you mean?”

“Our DNA is completely different,” she said. “We also have a blood type that is unique only to us. Our insides are arranged slightly differently as well. The arteries and major organs are more protected. The demon who stabbed you knew exactly where to put that knife so it would hit an artery.”

“It used my friend to do it. Frank killed her.”

“He killed the demon inside of her. Your friend was dead when the demon jumped her, I’m afraid. Don’t blame Frank for her death.”

“I don’t.”

“Good. Frank cares about you. You should be flattered, he isn’t known for his caring nature.”

I tried to smile, but I was still too weak.

“I’m going to let you rest now,” Eva said. “I’ll give you a sedative to help you sleep. By the time you wake up again you should feel better. Your healing abilities need time to work.”

I was too weak to argue as she took a syringe and stuck it in my thigh. Before the darkness descended again I thought about Kasey. Despite Frank and Eva telling me there was nothing I could have done to save her, the guilt still ate me.

I was glad when I finally closed my eyes so oblivion could claim me once more.

Chapter 14

I sat up in the bed and found I could do so without enduring too much pain. I had no idea how much time had passed since Eva injected me with the sedative. No light came from the small window in my room so I assumed it was night time. I looked down at my stomach and pressed gently with one hand, just to test the pain. My abdomen felt tender, my wound sore to the touch, but it felt like I was healing. I felt the Light Energy concentrated around the wound, producing a slight tingling sensation like millions of tiny robots were stitching me back together again. The blood drip had gone so I assumed I'd had enough to replace what was lost. However, I was still hooked up to the saline drip. I considered the needle in my arm for a moment, then pulled it out, a trickle of blood flowing down my arm.

Slowly, I swung my legs off the bed, the floor cold on my bare feet. I sat for a moment, gathered myself, then stood up. My legs didn't collapse from under me—which I considered a good

thing—and I stood for a minute, giving my body time to adjust. Still in my hospital gown, I walked to the door, one hand pressed gently over my wound.

I walked through the door into a dimly lit hallway. Obviously this was Eva's house. The smell of vanilla in the hall was a sharp contrast to the antiseptic odor of the room I was just in. I moved down the hallway and heard a low moaning sound coming from one of the rooms to my left. It was the last room at the end of the hall before it led into what looked like a living room. Except for the moaning sounds, the house was quiet and still. It felt like the early hours of the morning—that sense of stillness you only get at three or four a.m. I assumed Eva would be in bed. Frank was obviously still gone, maybe back at the cabin. I was thirsty, so I headed for the kitchen. The moaning at the end of the hall got louder the nearer I got. By the time I was by the door, I worked out that the sounds were coming from a woman in the throes of sex. It was unmistakable.

It had to be Eva.

But who was she with?

Pausing by the door, I listened intently for a moment, slightly embarrassed by what I heard. It got louder, turning to cries of ecstasy and I cringed when I heard Eva's voice cry out, "Fuck me, Frank…fuck

me…”

I put my hand over my mouth in shock.

Jesus, Frank. You dirty dog!

I shook my head and walked away from the door, completely grossed out.

In the kitchen I fixed myself a glass of water, the loud sounds of sex still hitting my ears from the bedroom around the corner. It really was getting embarrassing so I hurried towards the kitchen door, intending to get back to my room as soon as possible.

As I was about to switch off the light I spotted a book on the kitchen table. When I opened it, I saw it was a photo album. Evidently, Frank and Eva had been reminiscing while I was out of it earlier.

I set my glass on the table and flipped through the album, glancing over the photos. Eva was in a lot of the photographs, which was no surprise. Most of them depicted her when she was younger, in her late teens, early twenties, and early thirties. She was quite beautiful in her day, still was. I could see why Frank was into her. Her eyes where even more striking in the photos. Those large orbs seemed to look right into your soul.

The rest of the people I didn’t recognise, although I came across a few pictures of Frank, one with him and my dad along with Eva. My dad looked young, barely into his twenties. He and Frank looked alike, both handsome and cheerful in the photo. A sad smile crossed my lips and I placed a finger on the photo, gently brushing it across my dad’s face.

Turning the page, I came across two photos of my mom. In the first one she was with Eva and they were both smiling with their faces pressed together. My mom was beautiful in her own way as well, although she had a hard edge to her, like she had to be strong all the time. In the photo her dark brown hair was long and thick and she had on a tight T-shirt and blue jeans that showed of her curves. Although she was smiling, the smile never quite hit her deep brown eyes.

Appearance wise, I saw myself in her, but beyond that I saw no similarity. She possessed a strength I clearly didn’t have or I would have killed that demon before it stabbed me. My Mom would have, of that I had no doubt.

My jaw clenched as I looked at her face. I shook my head and shifted my attention to the other photo of her. This one was just her and Frank. They stood with their arms around each other and my mom was turned to face him while he looked at the camera. I also couldn't help but notice that my mom was wearing her wedding ring. My jaw tightened further as I took in the look on my mom's face as she gazed at Frank.

What was that look about?

I didn't think I had ever seen a look like that on her face before. It was almost soft, loving, a look my mom rarely if ever did for anyone except Josh and me, and even then it was never like the way she did it in the photograph. A deep scowl creased my brow as I stared hard at the picture trying to work out why it was making me tense and angry just looking at it.

"You're up."

I spun round in alarm and saw Frank standing in the doorway in just his boxer shorts. "What the fuck, Frank," I snapped. "You scared the shit out of me."

Frank held both his hands out. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. What are you doing up anyway?"

"Nothing. I was just going back to bed."

"Everything alright?" He was frowning at me.

"Fine." I pushed past him, made my way back to my room again, refusing to look through the open bedroom door where Eva was, probably sprawled naked on the bed in post coital bliss. I slammed the door when I got into my room.

Inside, I paced around for a moment, the glass of water still in my hand. My breathing was heavy and my limbs shook as my pacing got even more frantic. I stopped suddenly and threw the glass at the wall with a loud scream. Tears streamed from my eyes as I looked around the room for my clothes. I couldn't find them anywhere so I screamed again in frustration.

Just then the door opened and Frank walked in, now dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. "What's going on, Leia?" he said as he tried to come over and offer comfort.

“Stay back, Frank!” I said. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

Frank flinched like I’d hit him and he took a step back. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s you, Frank.” I glowered at him, my face tight with anger. “I can’t trust you. I don’t why I ever thought I could. I can’t trust *anyone*.”

Frank looked confused. “Does this have anything to do with the photos you where looking at in the kitchen? Because if it does I can —”

“Stop, Frank!” I cut him off. “Just stop! I don’t want to hear any more of your *lies*! I just want to get out of here. I can find my brother on my own. I don’t need you or anyone else.” I was snapping my head around the room. “Where are my clothes?”

Eva appeared in the doorway dressed only in a white Led Zeppelin T-shirt, her face still flushed from her recent bedroom antics. “I had to throw your clothes out. They were full of blood.” She took a step towards me, concern on her face now. “What’s wrong, Leia?”

“I need clothes. I need to get out of here!” I was back to pacing around the room, one hand pressed over my stab wound.

“Leia, you aren’t well enough to be leaving just yet,” Eva said in an infuriatingly calm voice.

“I don’t care! Just get me something to wear and I’m gone. You two can go back to fucking each other.” I threw Frank a look. “It’s what you’re good at it, isn’t it?”

Frank said nothing, just stared at me with a harrowed look on his face. He knew exactly what I was talking about.

“You’re not even trying to deny it.”

“Deny what?” Eva looked at Frank.

“Tell her, Frank. Tell Eva how you fucked my mom behind my dad’s back.” I shot Eva a look.

“You probably knew that already.”

Frank was shaking his head, staring hard at the floor. “You don’t understand,” he said. “That was a long time ago and—”

“She had her wedding ring on in that picture! I saw the way she was looking at you, Frank. Is that what she was doing all those times she wasn’t around? Was she out seeing *you*, Frank?” I paced around the room, furious, spitting venom. “It all makes sense now. That’s why you seem so guilty all the time, why you never want to talk about why my dad fell out with you. He hated you because you fucked his wife!” I was pointing my finger at him, shaking with rage. “That’s why she brought you back, because…she loved *you*! And not my dad!” I was crying, hardly able to see through the bitter tears in my eyes.

Frank looked at Eva for help. “It was a long time ago,” Eva said in the same patronisingly calm voice as she moved towards me. “It can all be explained…” Just then she stuck a needle in my leg and I pushed her back.

“What the hell did you just give me?” I screamed.

Eva backed away. “Just a sedative to calm you down.”

“I don’t need to fucking calming down!” I shook my head and backed up onto the bed away from them. I felt the drug working already. “I just need to get out of here, I need to see my friend…I need to see Kasey… my brother…I have to find Josh…”

Eva caught me just as I slumped back on to the bed. That was the last thing I remembered before I blacked out.

Chapter 15

Physically speaking, I felt much better when I woke again to find I was still in the same makeshift medical room in Eva's house. I sat up and pulled away the sheets, lifted up the hospital gown to examine my wound. A scar about six inches across was etched into the left side of my belly. No stitches. I hardly believed the wound had healed so quickly.

The memory of the last time I was awake hit me. My stomach tightened and my face hardened as I remembered screaming at Frank. Lying back in the bed, I gave myself a minute or two to consider things. Frank had all but admitted he had an affair with my mother while she was married to my father. While I hated him for what he had done, I hated my mom even more.

How could she do that to my father?

I never exactly held her up as being mother of the century before, but now she had slipped so far down in my esteem that any love I had for her was buried under so much resentment.

How could she do that to her children?

How could Frank do that to his own brother?

That would explain why Frank's name had never been mentioned. Clearly my dad despised him for what he had done. Yet my parents had stayed together.

But why? Why didn't my dad just throw her out? She was barely around anyway, what difference would it have made?

I could only assume that he couldn't stop loving her. What a chump.

I got out of bed. There was a fresh set of clothes placed neatly on a chair by the side of the bed. It was the exact same outfit I had been wearing when I got stabbed, but these clothes were new.

Did Eva actually go out and buy me new clothes? Or was it Frank? Maybe his woefully

inadequate way of trying to make amends.

Whatever.

I knew I couldn't trust Frank again. Nothing he could do or say would make me feel any

differently. The trouble was—and as much as I hated to admit it—I still needed him. Despite what I said, I couldn't possibly find my brother all by myself. I still needed his help and that made me feel like I was over a barrel as far as Frank was concerned. I was trapped in that situation with him and that was all there was to it.

I dressed and took a moment to compose myself before leaving the room, made my way down the hallway, a sense of dread coming over me at the thought of even seeing Eva and Frank again.

Eva sat alone in the kitchen at the scuffed wooden table, drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. There was no sign of Frank, for which I was grateful. I stood in the doorway, arms folded across my stomach as I scratched absently at one arm.

"Hello," Eva said rising from her chair as if nothing had happened. "Sit. I'll make you some coffee. Are you hungry yet?"

"No," I said taking a seat at the table. "What time is it?"

"Midday." She poured the coffee and placed the cup down in front of me, then sat back down in her chair.

"So where's Frank?"

"Out. Running down leads on your brother's disappearance."

"That's good of him." I sipped the coffee and sat with my legs crossed, holding the cup into my chest.

"I know how you must feel. Try not to think too badly of Frank."

"Why? Because you're fucking him?"

Eva maintained her steady composure and fixed her large eyes on me, her pupils huge. "No.

Because it happened a long time ago. He suffered enough back then; he doesn't need to go through it all again."

I was silent for a moment. "Did he love her?"

"Yes, he did." Eva dropped her gaze to the floor. I could tell she carried her own resentment around with her. "That's what made it so

hard at the time. I don't think Rachel felt quite the same way. She loved your father."

"Well, that's bullshit! If she loved my father, she wouldn't have gone behind his back with his brother. Neither would she have sold her fucking soul to save him." Anger rose in me again and I made a concerted effort to keep it under control this time.

"That's a fair point, but these things can be complicated. You're a little young to be trying to understand them."

"Please don't patronize me, I understand perfectly well. What they did was wrong. "

"Of course. But these things happen. You should be concentrating on getting your brother back, not things of the past."

"I'm trying. Am I supposed to just forget everything that I've learned, just let it all go?"

"Yes, let it go. At least for now. Your brother needs you strong, he needs you capable."

I thought about what she said. Josh needed me. I was the only lifeline he had. "What do you know about this whole thing? These kidnappings?"

"I've only heard rumors so far, nothing solid yet."

"What rumors?"

"That a demon has been taking Nephilim children from all over the world. I don't know why yet.

That's where Frank is, he's out talking to sources, trying to find a lead."

I allowed myself to relax a bit. "I'm sorry."

"What for, dear girl?"

"You fixed me up, saved my life and all I've done is give you shit."

Eva smiled and took my hand in hers. "You don't have to apologize. I know what you are going through. I went through the exact same process when I was your age. It gets easier, believe me, you just have to learn to trust your instincts, they'll help you."

“That’s what Frank said.”

“Let him be your teacher in all this. He wants to help you, and not just because of the reasons you think. He has a soft spot for you. He’s been alone for most of his life. As grumpy as he comes across, he enjoys having you around. Don’t be so hard on him.”

I looked into Eva’s blue eyes and saw a reflection of myself nodding in her large dark pupils.

“I’ll try, but I’m still seriously pissed at him.”

“That’s understandable.” Eva smiled. “I’ll also be here anytime you need something. Just come see me.”

I managed a half smile back. “I’ll try to remember that.”

About an hour later, having just said goodbye to Eva, I sat in the car with Frank as he drove through the rain soaked city streets. I liked Eva, despite her sometimes patronizing manner. She was kind and pretty cool in her own way. I decided I would get to know her better, but under different circumstances

Frank was taking us to see a source of his, a demon who would hopefully shed some light on my brother’s kidnapping. I sat in the car for ten minutes, having scarcely spoken a word to Frank.

The tense silence became unbearable, so I turned on the radio and seventies rock music replaced the quietness but not the tension between us. A moment later, Frank turned the radio off. “If we are going to work together, we need to get this out of the way first,” he said.

“Get what out of the way?”

“This.” He nodded his head emphatically as if to draw attention to what he was talking about.

“The tension, you know what I mean.” He was struggling, clearly not comfortable with talking about anything other than Watcher-related issues.

“I can’t help being mad at you, Frank. I don’t feel like I can trust you anymore.” I let that hang in the air for a second. “But at the same time I want to get my brother back and you’re the only person who can

help me with that, so I'll try to set your wrong doings aside for the time being."

"My wrong doings?" He shook his head as if I was talking nonsense.

I was going to check him on his attitude but then I thought, *Just forget it. Focus on what matters.*

Focus on getting Josh back. "So who is this guy, this demon?"

Frank didn't answer straight away. He kept driving until he could bring himself to speak. "He's a high-level demon who owes me a favour. If anyone knows what's going on it's him."

"You think he knows where my brother is?"

"We won't know that until we talk to him."

Neither of us spoke again until he drove us into the Perv District as it was known by some—

three square miles of sex clubs, porn shops and an array of other seedy establishments all geared towards the sexual gratification of their customers. It was mid afternoon so the place was subdued, especially as it was still raining. The clientele who tended to frequent this part of the city liked to come out at night, like rats from their holes, the darkness cloaking them. Despite this, there were still a few hookers roaming the streets and the sex clubs where all open, as they were twenty-four-seven.

"The Perv District?" I said with raised eyebrows as Frank pulled the car up outside a club called Demon Ecstasy. "Why am I not surprised."

"What do you want me to say?" He turned of the ignition. "The guy's a demon. He's hardly going to be hanging out at the Disney store, now is he?"

"Disney movies are full of evil characters."

Frank shook his head at me but neither of us could manage a smile as we got out of the car and walked towards the front doors of the club. "Let me do most of the talking. I'll get what we need."

"Suits me."

We stepped inside the dark interior of the club. I was expecting something a bit more

demonically themed—maybe gargoyles on the walls, some kind of Hell motif—but the club

turned out to be not much different from any other I'd been in. Three stages sat directly ahead, a large main one and two smaller ones to either side. A dancer swung around a pole on the centre stage, wearing only a thong, wrapping herself around the metal pole like an anaconda

enwrapping its prey. The club was surprisingly crowded for this time of day. About half the booths where occupied, by men mostly, drinking and watching the girl on stage as Alice

Cooper's "Poison" played over the PA system.

Frank led us down to the bar, to the left of the smaller stage. He called the bar man over and said something to him that I didn't catch because of the loud music. The bar man nodded and pointed to the back of the club, to a booth in the far corner. A man sat there alone. Frank nodded to the bar man and motioned for me to follow him. We made our way up to the booth where the man was sitting, which I assumed was Frank's demon contact.

"Frank Swanson. What an unexpected pleasure."

Sitting in the booth was a relaxed looking dark-skinned man in his late twenties, some sort of ridiculous bright blue cocktail with a novelty straw in the shape of a naked woman in it on the table in front of him. The drink also had a small orange umbrella in it. I hoped he was being ironic drinking that. The guy's dark hair was close shaved and he had unexpectedly soulful brown eyes for a demon that soon changed to bright yellow when I caught a brief glimpse of his true demon face. The demon's eyes locked on to me as he smiled and I looked away, not in the mood for his flirtatious games.

"That's a nice meat suit, Lucas," Frank said, pausing by the table was sitting at. "What happened to the other one?"

"I got bored with that one," Lucas said, his voice smooth and deep. "You know how it is, Frank."

"Not really."

Lucas turned his attention to me as if he couldn't be bothered with Frank's seriousness. "I see you've brought company." He regarded me like you would an exotic creature in a zoo. "A baby Watcher no less.

Nice."

"Thanks," I said. "That doesn't make me self-conscious at all."

Lucas smiled, almost impressed. "Feisty too."

"My niece." Frank sat down in the booth opposite Lucas. I sat in beside him. "Keep your demon eyes to yourself, Lucas."

"But she's perfection." Lucas stared at me like he wanted to dive right in. "How can I keep my eyes off such a beautiful creature?" His appraisal of me was a bit over the top, but he somehow got away with being so gregarious. I put it down to being a club owner and spending most of his time with beautiful women, telling them what they wanted to hear. "And what is your name?"

"Leia," I said, looking him in the eye, trying to seem like I wasn't affected by his presence, though I was for some reason, which surprised me. I was there on business. It didn't seem right to be checking him out in that way. He was a demon after all. The fact that I found him attractive disturbed me, but I couldn't help it. There was something about him. He intrigued me. Maybe because I sensed there was more to him underneath the boisterous club owner façade. Attraction is attraction anyway. Who knows why some people reel us in and others don't. The fact that he was a demon made it even more disturbing. I should have hated the guy on sight, given that his brethren had kidnapped my brother. Lucas didn't appear to have the air of evil menace possessed by all the other demons I'd met so far. That was refreshing to say the least, and it made me wonder if not all demons were bad.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Leia." He extended his arm towards me. "I'm Lucas."

I hesitated a second then shook his hand. A strange tingling sensation prickled my skin and I couldn't believe I actually blushed.

How embarrassing.

"Behave, Lucas," Frank said and Lucas let go of my hand.

"You have a beautiful niece, Frank."

"I didn't come here so you could leer over my niece. I need information."

“And what makes you think I have information to give?” Lucas had his gaze fixed on Frank now.

“That’s what I’m here to find out. You still owe me, don’t forget.”

Lucas stared at Frank for a moment like he was going to take offense at that. Frank held his gaze until Lucas smiled. “Unfortunately, I do.” He looked at me. “Did Frank tell you why I owe him, Leia?”

I shook my head and looked at Frank. He seemed uncomfortable now, but then Frank always did when people were around. “She doesn’t need to know that,” he said.

“I think she does, Frank,” Lucas said. “Your niece here should know what a stand-up guy her uncle is, right?” He looked at me as if for confirmation. I shrugged noncommittally.

“Okay, then.” Lucas was evidently savouring the moment. I heard Frank sigh beside me. “I was having a little trouble a while back with a faction of demons who were causing havoc in the Perv District here. This faction wanted all the business for themselves and they were killing demons and humans alike to get what they wanted. They posed a real threat to my various businesses.”

He stopped to smile at me. “I’m just a business man. I don’t like violence—”

“You’re a demon,” I said interrupting, taking mild enjoyment from pointing that out.

Lucas made a show of being offended. “We’re not all violent beasts; some of us actually enjoy being here on earth. It has its own pleasures.” He gave me a knowing smile. I couldn’t help smiling back, but I stopped when I saw the look on Frank’s face.

“Just finish the story,” Frank said. “So we can get down to business.”

“Alright, Frank,” Lucas said regarding me once more. “Your uncle isn’t known for his patience.”

I glanced at Frank who shook his head. “Moving along,” he said proving Lucas’s point.

“Told you,” Lucas said. “Anyway, I’m a businessman. Violence just leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I saw enough of it in Hell to last me an eternity. It gets old, you know what I’m saying?

So I call Frank, ‘cause he owes me one for information I provided to him. I always call on my debts, Leia, you’ll learn that about me. So I explain the situation to Frank and Frank says he’ll

‘sort it out,’ which he did.”

“What did he do?” I asked, more to move him along than out of any interest I had in the story he was telling. Knowing Frank, I knew where the story was going.

“What he does best,” Lucas said. “He tracked down the leaders of the faction and he killed them, all twelve of them. But you know what he did then?” He paused, obviously waiting for my response.

“Go on.”

Please just hurry up.

“Well, he only cut their heads off and put them on spikes right in the centre of the Perv District where everyone could see.” He started laughing. “People were *freaked*, man, you remember, Frank?”

“I remember,” Frank said tight-lipped.

“The cops thought there was some mad serial killer on the prowl and all the while most of Mercy City was scared shitless because they thought their heads where going to end up on a spike. The religious nuts saw it as some kind of divine retribution, like a warning from God not to get involved in the sex trade or that’s what happens, you lose your head.” He made a cutting motion with his hand across his neck. “And the demons, they knew to whom those heads belonged. That faction that was causing all the trouble, they soon moved on somewhere else. They got the message right, Frank?”

“They did,” Frank said, clearly humouring Lucas.

“So, Leia,” Lucas said leaning towards me, fixing me with his smouldering dark eyes. “What do you think of your uncle now, huh?”

I shrugged, not really knowing what to say. “I guess he did what he had to do.”

Lucas’s eyes narrowed. “This one will go far, Frank.”

“Alright, Lucas, you’ve had your fun,” Frank said. “We need to talk *now*!”

“Always wanting to get straight to business, a man after my own heart. So shoot, what do you need to know?”

“I take it you’ve heard about the Nephilim kids going missing?”

“Yes, I may have heard something about that.”

“You have any idea what’s going on there, you know who’s taking them?”

Lucas looked uncomfortable for the first time since we got there. I could tell he knew something but was reluctant to say what. “My brother was taken,” I said.

“Your brother?” Lucas said. “So that’s the real reason you’re here, is it? To find your brother?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Lucas looked at me as if deciding whether or not to give up what he knew. “This one goes above my pay grade if you know what I mean.”

“You’re not exactly a minor demon, Lucas,” Frank said. “Are you saying that whoever is doing this is high up? Higher than you even?”

“A lot higher.” Lucas looked around the club. “I don’t even feel comfortable talking about this.”

“Well, tough. You owe me, Lucas. Spit it out, tell us what you know.”

Lucas looked pained for a moment. When he spoke, he spoke in a low and serious voice, his previous swagger all but gone. He looked fearful, which I didn’t think was possible for a demon.

“I don’t know much, I’ve just heard a few things is all. There’s a high-level demon—and I mean, right up there—taking Nephilim kids because he’s using them to fulfil some sort of plan.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Using them for what?”

“From what I hear, he’s building an army,” Lucas said. “Though I don’t know what for.”

“An army?” said Frank. “But the kids are Nephilim.”

“I know, but he’s turning them.”

“Turning them?” I said uneasily.

“Demonizing them.” His eyes bored into me as he said it.

I looked helplessly at Frank then back to Lucas. “You’re saying my brother is being turned into a demon?”

“He probably is one already.”

“That can’t be true.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“How reliable is this information?” Frank asked.

“You know me,” Lucas said. “When have I ever lied to you?”

Frank stared at Lucas and then looked at me. “We don’t know anything for sure, don’t start panicking yet.”

“That’s easy for you to say, it isn’t your brother being turned into a demon.”

“You’re right.” His voice was deliberately calm. “I’m just saying we don’t know for sure yet, that’s all.” He looked at Lucas. “Who’s supposed to be doing this? You have a name?”

Lucas thought for a long time. “I’m taking a big risk here man, giving you a name,” he said.

“The word is out there that if anybody even speaks it they’ll pay dearly.”

“Hey, I almost got killed for you. Tell me.”

“Alright, but you didn’t hear any of this from me, got it?”

“I got it, now speak.”

“The demon’s name is Abigor,” he said in a hushed tone of voice. “He’s the worst of the worst and not to be messed with.”

This just keeps getting better.

I was never going to get Josh back and not only that, he was now condemned to live as a demon so he could serve in some demon army. It was all I could do to hold back my tears as I sat stiff and silent at the table.

“Where can we find this Abigor?” Frank asked.

“That I can’t help you with,” Lucas said. “Abigor is only found when he wants to be found. And listen,” he leaned in towards Frank, “I know Abigor from my time in Hell. He was feared even down there. I wouldn’t advise going up against him unless you want to die a horrible death.”

I’d heard enough at that point. I stood up and bolted away from the table, ignoring Frank’s pleas to come back. I felt sick so I burst through the front doors of the club, the brightness from outside causing me to squint. I knelt down under the canopy above the doors, my chest tight, on the verge of hyperventilating.

Frank ran out a moment later. “Hey,” he said, putting a hand on my back that I immediately brushed off.

“Leave it,” I said. “Just leave me alone alright, Frank?”

Frank said nothing for a moment. “I’ll be in the car when you’re ready.” He walked away and sat in the car. I stayed crouched over under the canopy of the club for another few minutes before I was able to get up and walk to the car. Frank said nothing when I got in. He started the car and drove.

“I need you to take me somewhere,” I said after a while.

“Where?” he asked frowning.

“To pick up Kasey’s body.”

In between crying, disgust filled me as I laid eyes on Kasey’s dead body. Her corpse lay on the filthy floor in the room where Frank had killed her days before, or rather, where he had killed the demon. I had to keep reminding myself that the demon killed Kasey and not Frank. Her eyes were open and her face was ashen, frozen in shock. She’d been dead for almost three days, enough time for the rats in the building to gnaw pieces of flesh from her dead body.

Frank wrapped Kasey’s body in a blanket he got from the car, then we carried her to the back of the building where the car was parked and no one would see us. We put the body in the trunk and drove back to the cabin. Once there, Frank got hold of two shovels and we carried Kasey’s body to the edge of the forest at the back of the cabin.

“Thanks for your help,” I said. “I can do the rest alone.”

Frank nodded and walked back to the cabin.

Choosing a small clearing just inside the forest perimeter—not far from where Frank buried Bane—I started digging with the shovel. The ground was soft, but even so, it took me a long while to dig a hole that would be deep enough. When I’d finished digging I threw the shovel down and sat beside Kasey’s body, which was still wrapped up in the blanket. Only her head was visible. I stared down at her gray face, trying to ignore the holes in her cheeks left there by the rats.

Kasey had always been a good friend to me. Next to Josh, she was the only person who

understood me, mainly because I let her in, because I trusted her.

Kasey’s parents both died in a car crash when she was eight years old, so she could understand how losing my own parents could affect me. We had that in common and that’s what initially bonded us when I first met her in high school, that and the fact that we were both in foster care, in homes that we hated. The only difference was that Kasey got the courage to hit the streets when she was fifteen, unable to take the abuse from cruel foster parents anymore.

When she started living on the streets, she developed a front, an attitude that helped her cope with the rough and unforgiving environment she was trying to survive in. She was smart, so she quickly adapted to that life.

We continued to hang out together even after she lived on her own. She told me she didn’t feel alone on the streets because she knew I would always be there for her if she needed me, which I was. Even the time some asshole dealer that she owed tried to pimp her out to pay the debt, I had Josh step in and he put the dealer in hospital. Then there was the time she got really sick during a particularly cold winter in Mercy City. I somehow found the money to put her up in a hotel room for a week until she got better, bringing her food and medicine everyday, staying by her side. It wasn’t a chore because I knew she would have done the same for me if she could. People didn’t see that side of Kasey; they didn’t see the love in her. All they saw was the skanky street kid with too much attitude.

I sat by her body and cried. She didn’t deserve the hand she was dealt. A sensitive soul like her should never have been trampled on. At least she had found peace, even if it was at the hands of a vile demon.

It was dark by the time I put her cold body into the hole I'd dug. As I shovelled the earth on top of her, all I could think about was exacting vengeance on the demons who had taken my brother.

They had already taken my best friend from me, I wasn't about to let them have my brother as well.

I shovelled the last of the loose earth into Kasey's grave and flattened it down with the head of the shovel, banging the earth harder with every motion until I screamed and swung the shovel at the nearest tree. The head of the shovel snapped off and flew into the woods somewhere, leaving me holding a broken shaft which I used to beat against the tree, screams of pain and frustration spewing out of me with every hit. Eventually I flung the shaft of the shovel into the woods as hard as I could then bent over, out of breath, tears dripping from my eyes.

I stood and vowed again to wreak vengeance on her behalf.

Even if it killed me.

Chapter 16

Frank was sat in his usual chair by the fireplace when I got back to the cabin. “Here,” he said handing me a glass of whiskey.

“No, thanks,” I told him. “I think I’m just going to go my room.”

“Take a drink. Toast your friend.”

I stood for a moment then nodded and took the glass. He gestured for me to sit, so I sat in the chair opposite him as he held his glass out. “To your friend.”

“To Kasey.” We touched glasses. I downed the whiskey in one and he poured me another.

“I know it’s not easy losing people. But people die in this game we play. That’s how it’s always been and how it always will be.”

I scowled at his cynicism. “Is that what all this to you?” Weariness deadened my voice. “Just a game?”

“In a way. But that doesn’t mean I don’t take it seriously. You’ll understand what I mean when you’ve been doing it for a while.”

“Well, that’s the thing.” I gulped more of the whiskey, despite the foul taste. “I’m not sure I want to be a part of this anymore, despite my desire for some kind of vengeance or whatever. It’s too much, I can’t handle it. Josh is lost to me now anyway.” Tears welled in my eyes and threatened to spill over but I’d cried so much over the last week or so I didn’t think I had any more tears left in me.

“Come on now,” he said in as tender a voice as I’d ever heard him use. “It’s not over yet. The battle hasn’t even begun. Trust me.”

“What do you mean?”

Frank downed his whiskey and then poured another, offering to put more in my glass too before I stopped him and he shrugged. “Okay, so we know this demon is creating an army out of

Nephilim children,” he said. “He’s turning them into demons, which means he’s probably

feeding them his blood—that’s how it’s done, the more blood they

take the farther gone they get.

To turn them back you have to stop giving them the blood. They're like addicts, you need to force them into cold turkey, dry them out. That's the theory anyway, whether it will actually work is another matter."

"Are you saying Josh might be saved?" I allowed myself a glimmer of hope for the first time since I'd learned of my brother's fate.

"There're never any guarantees with this stuff, but I think there's a good chance we can save him and the others, if we can get to them that is, and get to them in time. At a certain point there is no turning back and they'll remain demons forever. That's a possible reality you have to be brave enough to face."

"Alright. So how do we find them?"

"I called Eva, she's working on it now. She has a plan—she'll be here soon."

"So what's the plan?"

"A summoning. We're going to summon your brother here, tonight."

Eva arrived sometime after dark. She wore a long dark overcoat and black knee high boots, looking like some kind of sexy witch. I was glad to see her again and she gave me a comforting smile when she saw me. She asked me if I was ready and I nodded and even though I wasn't sure if I was. Sensing my dread she put a maternal arm around me as the three of us went down into the cellar.

Frank and Eva got to work, while I looked on, feeling like a spare part. I'd had no experience in these rituals, except the ones I had tried to conduct myself over the years, but those were all nonsense, based on information I'd found online and in dubious books on the occult. That was wrong information from people who didn't know any better, *for* people who didn't know any better, like teenage girls who'd seen *The Craft* too many times wanting to indulge their fantasies of being a "Wicca". My motivations were different, wanting to contact supernatural forces so I could find out about my parents. Given what I know now about demons and the like, I'm glad none of my bedroom rituals ever worked; they could have ended in disaster without the proper guidance.

Frank drew magic symbols of some kind with paint around each point of the pentagram on the cellar floor. “If we’re successful in summoning Josh here, he won’t be able to move outside of the circle,” he said.

As Frank painted sigils on the floor, Eva mixed various ingredients in a large wooden mixing bowl, crushing things with her hands and pouring various liquids from bottles that looked the same as the ones I’d seen back at her house. “There are certain ingredients needed for different spells,” she said. “For this to work we’ll need some sort of physical representation of your brother, like a photo.”

I went to my room and got the sketch I had drawn of Josh while I was in the woods that day.

“Will this do?”

Eva took the sketch and put it inside the bowl with the rest of the ingredients. Frank placed lit candles around the points of the pentagram. More sigils were etched into each of the candles.

The whole thing reminded me of some sort of black magic ritual, which when I thought about it, it was. We were summoning a demon after all, even if it was my brother.

“All done,” Frank said standing beside Eva. “You ready?”

Eva nodded, her eyes dark focused. They both looked at me.

“I’m ready,” I said. I tried to sound like I was calm but I wasn’t. I’d no doubt they heard the nervousness in my voice, but they didn’t comment on it. I didn’t know what to expect. All I knew was if the spell worked, then my brother would appear before us in the room. I also knew that if he did appear, that would mean that he was in fact a demon.

Eva stood at the edge of the circle and spoke some sort of spell in what I thought was Latin. My eyes were glued to the inside of the circle. The wait was agonizing as I stood beside Frank, who yawned at one point like the whole situation was boring him. He had probably done this a hundred times or more already.

“Attenro bendum Eos, ad consiendrum, ad ligandum Eos, potiterer solvendum, et ad,

congregontumeos, 'coram me….”

As Eva recited the spell I recited my own words to myself: *Oh God, oh God, oh God*…although I'm sure God wasn't listening. Even if He was still in control of this mad house called the universe, I doubted he would help me in any way. That was okay. I never wanted His help, not since my parents got killed.

Eva finished the incantation. She stepped back from the circle.

The room was a bastion of silence and I could almost feel the electricity in the air.

I was afraid to breathe as I continued to wait in tortured suspense until finally I couldn't help myself. "He's not coming…"

No sooner had the words left my mouth when my brother appeared before our eyes inside the circle. My jaw went slack and my eyes widened as I stared in disbelief.

It actually worked.

"Hello, Sis," Josh said to me. "Nice of you to call."

Chapter 17

“Josh!”

Without thinking I ran to him. All the emotion that had been churning in me like a tidal wave since his disappearance rose to the surface. I wanted to hold my brother again, but Eva gripped my arm and held me back.

“Wait!” she said. “No!”

I struggled as she grabbed both my arms, preventing me from moving with surprising ease. She was a lot stronger than she looked. “Let me go!” I said writhing in her iron grip. Eva said nothing, just continued to restrain me like I was an out of control child.

“I see you’ve made some new friends, Sis,” Josh said from inside the circle.

Sis? He never calls me that. He knows I hate it.

“That’s good, so have I. In fact, my mentor wants to meet you. He wants you on the team actually.”

The more he spoke the more I realized it wasn’t my brother standing there in the room with us. I stopped my struggling and Eva let go of my arms. “You’re not Josh,” I said, choking back tears.

Josh had unmistakable warmth to him that wasn’t present in the person standing before me. The Josh in the circle had an air of coldness about him that the real Josh never had.

“But I *am* Josh,” Demon Josh said. “I’m still your brother, Leia. I’m just new and improved.”

“You mean you’re a demon,” Eva said. Her voice held disdain. She obviously had as much love for demons as Frank did.

Demon Josh threw Eva a scornful look before switching his gaze to me again. “Who’s this bitch?” he said. “What are you doing with these people, Leia? You don’t belong here, you belong with me and the others, at Abigor’s side.”

“I don’t think so.” I was trying hard to keep my voice level and not break down like the hysterical sister I was on the inside. All I wanted

to do was plead with Josh to come back to me but I knew it wouldn't be good to show such weakness so I tensed up and straightened my back, and made a fist as I battled to keep myself under control.

"Abigor gave me the lowdown on my Nephilim background," Demon Josh went on. "He showed

me how strong I was, showed me how to be stronger, more powerful…more fucking *badass*." He paced around inside the circle like a lion that hadn't eaten in days, barely able to restrain himself.

"Stronger than any of you will ever be!" His eyes rolled into black, a predatory smile on his face.

The complete change in him broke my heart. He held out his hand. "Come back with me, Leia.

Come back with me and we can be together."

I looked at his outstretched hand. It was hard not to just step forward and take it, even though I knew if I did there'd be no going back and I'd end up as bad as him. I swallowed hard. "No."

He snorted. "You really think you have to stay here and fight the good fight or some bullshit?

You think you can find a way to save me, is that it?" He laughed, a mirthless laugh I've never heard from him before. It chilled me to the core. "Let me state the facts for you, Sis. For all of you," he said his horrible black eyes burning holes in us. "There's no escaping what's coming.

The world as you know it is going to end. Only the strong will survive and the strong are on *our* side, not on your side. You'll all be wiped out, squashed like bugs under the *real* power."

"That's a nice speech," Frank said. He moved in front of Josh so he was standing just two feet away. "Did your mentor write those lines for you? Bit clichéd, don't you think?"

Josh's face darkened, his black eyes smouldering. "You can make your little jokes. It doesn't matter anyway; you're all on borrowed time. And for the record, Abigor is more than just my mentor—he's my creator. He opened my eyes to the truth."

"And what's the truth?" Frank said. "You going to take over the world,

is that it? Or is your master just using you all as cannon fodder in a war that he plans to start?"

Demon Josh smiled like he was above everything Frank was saying. "You'll see soon enough, asshole."

"Josh," I said, approaching the perimeter of the demon trap like I was about to try and calm down a dangerous animal. "If there is any humanity left in you at all, please use it to fight this and come back to me. Please, Josh, I need you here with me. Dad, Mom, they wouldn't want this for you."

Josh looked at me with his own eyes for a moment, the black demon eyes gone. For a second I thought I had somehow gotten through to him, but then that cold and mirthless laugh came out of his mouth again. "You dumb bitch, you haven't a clue, have you?" He laughed again like he'd just heard some sick joke. "You don't know do you, what our so-called Mom did?"

"Actually, I do."

He wasn't expecting that. The smile left his face. "Well then, you know where dear old mom lives these days. She's a resident of Hell now, being tortured in ways you will never know." His black eyes glared at me as I did my best to keep from falling apart right there in front of him.

"I've been down there. Being a demon now, I get to go there whenever I want. It's an amazing place really, more interesting than this shitty world could ever hope to be. I get to watch our mother in her endless torment. Best of all, she gets to see me watch. She gets to see me revel in her pain and misery, every fucking ounce of which she deserves by the way. You know that, don't you, Leia? You know what she did, how she was. The bitch screwed us."

"No…"

"Yes! She fucked us! She deserves everything she gets!" He stood in a rage, his fists balled, his neck muscles straining.

"No! Fuck you! You're just a fucking demon prick, you're not my brother!"

"That's it! Let the hate out! Feel the power of it! Revel in it, Leia, revel in it!"

“Eva!” Frank shouted. “Get rid of him!”

“Don’t bother, bitches. I’ll go on my own.” Demon Josh looked at me one final time. “There’s a place for you, Leia, remember that. This world is going to end; you should be on the winning side with me. It’s either that or you die along with the other pathetic humans. Your choice.” His eyes bored into me for another second and then he was gone, vanishing just as suddenly as when he’d first appeared.

I ran out of the cellar knowing only one thing: I had to get out of the cabin, to get away. I needed to be alone.

I bolted through the front door. Eva chased after me, calling my name and telling me to stop, but I didn’t listen. I hardly heard her and only stopped when she pulled my arm from behind.

“Leave me alone!” I said to her, pulling my arm out of her grip.

“Okay, okay,” she said, raising her hands in a submissive gesture. “I’m just making sure you’re alright. I know how crazy that must have been for you.”

“Crazy?” I said mocking her. “My brother’s a fucking demon! There’s nothing more to say.”

With that I opened the front door and walked out toward the Mustang.

“Leia, where are you going?”

“Away from here.” I pulled open the car door and got in.

“You don’t have to run,” she shouted after me, but I stopped listening to her. I started up the Mustang and sped off down the dirt mountain road, the back wheels spinning out dust and dirt in my wake. I turned the car right when I got to the bottom and started along the main road, nothing on either side of me but forest and the occasional car passing me by.

I didn’t know where I was going. I just drove, not caring where I ended up. Being around Frank and Eva in that cabin wasn’t an option. Listening to their platitudes would drive me crazy. I’d had enough.

As I drove along a mountain road, something caught my eye by the passenger side window and knocked me out of my reverie. It was a black shape—no more than a shadow—that disappeared almost as

soon as I looked. I focused out the window, wondering what the hell I had just seen.

There had definitely been something there, but I wasn't sure if it was just a shadow from a tree I had passed or something else. I kept looking towards the window as I drove, but I saw nothing more unusual.

Until I looked in the rear-view mirror and noticed two glowing orbs a few feet behind the car. I looked harder and just made out a black shape in the darkness. The shape moved closer to the car and I realized what was behind me.

A demon.

A flying demon.

Motherfucker.

I was driving at nearly sixty-miles-per-hour; the winged demon was having no trouble keeping up with me, its molten red eyes glaring in through the rear window.

"You've got to be kidding," I said gripping the steering wheel tight.

What the hell is this? A hijack attempt?

The flying demon cruised along behind me, maintaining a steady speed, effortlessly turning corners along with the car. In the rear-view I could just make out its face. It was an ugly son of a bitch that had no nose, just two holes in the centre of its face and a huge lipless mouth containing sharp, permanently bared teeth.

The demon kept up with the car as it stared in at me. Rather than wait for it to make its move, I took pre-emptive action. Keeping my gaze fixed on its red eyes I slammed on the brakes so the demon would go crashing into the car. The plan was to ground the demon and reverse over the top of it. It wasn't a *great* plan, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. I wasn't about to let the thing run me off the road, especially since there was a steep decline on the left side that led down to a deep ravine. I wasn't keen on ending up down there, exploding into a fireball in the darkness.

I hit the brakes, but the demon merely sailed over the top of the car, ending up in front of me, hovering in midair about twenty yards in front, its huge bat-like wings flapping either side of it.

“Fuck!” I immediately put the car in gear again and lurched forward, heading straight towards the hovering demon, which shot up into the air to avoid me.

The damn thing was too agile to hit with the car. It was like trying to hit a wasp by throwing a brick at it. My only option was to try and outrun it, to keep driving until I got to the city where I hoped the creature would stop chasing me.

I kept wondering as I drove what it wanted. If it wanted me dead or to kidnap me it would have made its move by now, I figured. Since it hadn’t, I could only assume it was messing with me.

Frank had said demons like to do that, mess with people for no reason. I still remained convinced the thing was a minion of Abigor’s though. I kept looking but I could see no sign of the demon, in front or behind and for a minute I thought it had gone.

A loud thud on the roof of the car told me otherwise. Too close for comfort. “What the *fuck* do you want?” I shouted through the roof, not expecting an answer but needing to vent my

frustration and growing anger. I almost slammed on the brakes intending to get out and confront it when its face suddenly appeared upside down right in front of me on the other side of the windshield, molten eyes mocking me, its grotesque mouth stuck in a rictus grin.

“Jesus!” The shock of seeing that ugly assed face nearly caused me to swerve the car into the crash barrier. Adrenaline shot through me as I fought to gain back control of the car, the demon’s face inches away on the other side of the glass, obstructing my view. It’s kind of hard to drive when you have a demon on the windshield gawking in at you.

My heart pounding like a jackhammer, I managed to wrestle back control of the car. “Fuck you!”

I said to the grinning demon and I banged on the brakes as hard as I could. The car screeched to a halt and I shot forward, seat belt digging painfully into my shoulder and chest. The demon whipped off the car, tumbling back on the asphalt like a rag doll with wings before coming to a halt and lying motionless in the middle of the road.

I didn’t hesitate.

Shaking, I put the car in gear and floored the accelerator, the tires screaming on the asphalt as I drove towards the grounded demon as

fast as the car would allow, which being a Mustang, was pretty fast.

“Screw you, motherfucker!” I said, the car racing towards the downed demon, its head raised, helpless to do anything as the big car sped towards it like a black metal angel of death. The car ran over the ugly bastard with a satisfying thump.

I didn’t stop to see the damage. I kept driving and checking the rear-view mirror for signs of it but saw none.

I think it got the message.

I doubted the demon was dead or anything, but I hoped it hurt like hell when I ran over it.

When I reached the city I couldn’t help constantly checking in the rear-view mirror as I drove, half expecting a set of burning red eyes to be staring back at me when I did. Nothing appeared.

The demon was gone.

After a while I found myself driving through the Perv District. Unlike that afternoon when I was there with Frank, the place was lit up with neon signs and the streets were crawling with people.

As most of the city was winding down, this place was just coming alive. Pretty soon I decided I had enough of driving. I felt like sitting in a darkened corner of some bar and getting drunk on vodka. I would do it for Kasey, I decided. Send her off properly.

Whether through coincidence or by subconscious design, I pulled the car up outside the Demon Ecstasy club where Frank and I had been that afternoon. Maybe the place was just familiar to me. I had never been to any of the bars or clubs in the Sex District before, so the one that Lucas, the demon, owned was the only one I knew. After parking the car, I went inside the club.

Considering the time of night, I was expecting a lot more people to be inside, but it was barely half full which suited me fine. I felt the eyes of the men in the club on me as I stood by the doors looking around. Loud eighties rock music pumped through the PA and lithe bodied girls danced on all three stages. Ignoring the looks I was getting, I glanced over towards the bar and saw Lucas standing there. He was talking to one of the dancers, a red-haired girl with a set of angel wings tattooed on her back. Lucas smiled as he ran his hand over the

girl's naked ass. He stopped when he saw me. Our eyes met across the club and he smiled at me with glowing yellow demon eyes.

Well, better the devil you know…

Chapter 18

“Miss Swanson. What an unexpected surprise.”

He was dressed as immaculately as he had been that afternoon, wearing a dark gray suit with a black shirt and black tie, looking every inch the trendy club owner. I watched, bemused, as he patted the red-haired dancer he was standing with on the ass and told her to be on her way. I remained impassive as the large breasted girl looked me up and down before strutting off in her high heels.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” I said.

“Not at all,” Lucas said. “I was just consorting with one of my girls. I like to make sure they’re happy. I’m a good boss that way.”

I took a seat at the bar. “Be a good boss and get me a drink then.”

“I see you’ve inherited your uncle’s good manners.” He indicated to the barman to come over.

“What’s your poison, Miss Swanson?”

“Vodka. Neat.”

Lucas seemed surprised. “I had you pegged as a Manhattan kind of girl.”

I frowned. “I don’t even know what that is.”

He gave me an “*are-you-serious?”* look, then smiled and shook his head. “Simple tastes. I like it.” He turned to the barman. “Two double vodkas.” The barman went to get the drinks and Lucas turned his attention back to me. “I have to say, I’m surprised to see you here. I hope this is a social call and not another visit to try and get information out of me. I told you all I knew this morning.”

“I know, I’m not here for that.”

“So why are you here?”

Just then the barman arrived back with the vodkas and placed them on the bar top in front of us. I picked up one of the glasses and knocked the drink back, downing it in one gulp, closing my eyes for a second as the vodka left a burning sensation in my chest and stomach,

then I slammed the empty glass back down on the bar top. “Keep ‘em coming,” I instructed the barman, and for the first time I noticed his demon face flickering into view and he gave me a dark look. I just stared back at him.

“Don’t mind her,” Lucas said to the demon bartender. “She’s a Watcher.”

The barman looked freaked for a second until Lucas told him to relax and go get more drinks.

“Actually bring the bottle,” he said, sitting in the chair beside me.

“Now you’re talking,” I said.

“Well, you look like you want to drink,” he said. “Who am I to deprive you of that pleasure? I own this place after all.”

I sat in silence as Lucas sat watching me. I could tell he was curious about me, about who I was and why exactly I had come to his place alone. When the barman brought the bottle of vodka, Lucas filled the two glasses again. He raised his glass. “To new friends.”

I raised my glass. “To getting wasted.”

“That too.” We clinked glasses and knocked back the shots. Lucas refilled the glasses again. The vodka was expensive and tasted good, certainly better than the cheap stuff Kasey used to steal for us from the stores she pilfered from.

“I am trying to work out why you’re here,” Lucas said. “Help me out. You didn’t just happen to be passing by, that much I know.”

I said nothing as I looked around the club, purposely avoiding his question. By that time, I knew exactly why I was there, but I wasn’t about to tell him.

“Something obviously happened,” he said. “Did you have a falling out with your uncle Frank?

He can be difficult at times.”

“No.” I shook my head and took a mouthful of vodka. “Frank and I are fine.”

Sort of.

Lucas kept probing. “Someone else then. Who?”

“I don’t even know if I can trust you.”

“Trust? What does trust have to with anything? We’re just two strangers in a bar talking.”

“Not quite.”

“You think I’m going to screw you over somehow? Did Frank tell you not to trust me?”

“He did.” I emptied my glass, picked up the bottle from the bar and poured myself another.

Lucas’s glass was still full.

“Frank doesn’t trust anyone,” Lucas said laughing. “I’ve known your uncle for a long time. He’s a good guy, but he doesn’t do himself any favors.”

“You mean he doesn’t take any shit from demons like you?”

He laughed again, a deep throaty laugh. He seemed laid back for a demon. “Don’t be so harsh; you don’t know me. I’m actually one of the good guys.” He paused for effect. “Most of the time.”

I nodded. “Most of the time?”

“Hey, I’m still a demon. I can’t help that, no more than you can help being Nephilim.”

“I only found that out recently, that I’m Nephilim.”

“Really?” Lucas’s eyebrows arched. “Does that explain why you’re here then? Is it all getting a bit overwhelming? Do you just need a friendly demon ear to listen?”

A smile spread across my face despite myself. “Whatever you think.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “Why don’t we take this bottle and go to my suite upstairs. You can tell me all about it. I promise I won’t try anything.”

“I’m supposed to trust you? You’re a demon. Why should I trust a demon?”

“Good point.” He leaned in closer to me, lowered his voice to a deep whisper. “If it weren’t for the fact that we both know why you are here.”

My heart skipped a beat when he said that and for a moment I felt almost embarrassed until I looked into his eyes. “Why can’t I see your real face?”

“Because I’m not letting you,” he said. “Do you want to see my real face?”

I thought for a second. “Yes.”

I was never one for relationships. Too messy, too much trouble. Sex, on the other hand, I didn’t have a problem with. Since I first had sex at fourteen, it was something I turned to sometimes, mostly when things got really bad in my life and I needed an escape that my art or drink and drugs couldn’t provide, at least not on their own. And with the right partner, I enjoyed it. It usually gave me the release I was looking for.

So when I walked into Lucas’s suite in the upstairs of the club, I knew I was going to get that release. It was weird though. Lucas was a demon, for a start. I’d never slept with a demon before, so that in itself was making me nervous.

And how old was he?

Hundreds, probably thousands of years older than me . That practically made him a pedophile if you wanted to think like that.

As he took me through the door that led into his office, I didn’t care about any of that. Neither did I pay much attention to my surroundings as he took me by the hand and led me through the office, through another door that took us into a large room with a huge bed on the far side of it.

I raised my eyebrows at him when I saw the bed, but I didn’t question him on it. At that point, we both knew the score.

Letting go of his hand, I walked silently to the bed, then without a word I proceeded to take off my clothes as he stood at a distance watching me. I didn’t know if it was the vodka or the fact that I was so suddenly worked up, but I felt no embarrassment as I undressed for him.

What am I getting into?

Dancing with the devil was never a good idea. At the moment, though, I didn't care. The excitement of the situation had gripped me.

There was no going back.

After a moment I backed up onto the huge bed and lay down on the black silk sheets. "Well," I said in a low husky voice. "Why are you standing there like you've never seen a girl naked before?" Most times I preferred the guy I was with to take the lead, but I got a perverse kind of thrill from being cheeky with a high-level demon who could rip me apart in seconds if he so desired. The inherent danger of the situation only increased my enjoyment of it.

Lucas walked to the foot of the bed and undressed out of his suit, his eyes never leaving mine, a hungry look in them, like he wanted to consume my very soul. He took off his shirt to reveal his immaculate dark brown skin and his rippling muscles and I wondered briefly if his meat suit was in that condition when he got it or did he work to get it that way. He took his pants off and I slid my hand down between my legs, massaging, rubbing, feeling the wetness on my fingers. My eyes never left his, even though I wanted to close them. The depth of his experience shone in his dark eyes and it scared me a little to think of some of the things he might have done in his lifetime as a demon. Depraved, unspeakable acts. I felt vulnerable, but not so much that I wanted to stop.

He was down to just his underwear and I could see the shape of his stiff cock through his black boxer shorts. I rubbed harder at myself as he took off his underwear to reveal himself. He stood for a moment so I could admire his near perfect form. He had definitely chosen his human host well.

Spreading my legs wider, I moaned with the sensations already running through me. He gasped slightly when I did this and he crawled on the bed towards me, his head going between my legs as he began to kiss around my swollen pussy. Gripping his shaven head, I forced him to put his tongue in me and when I felt it go in I sucked in a breath and gripped his head tighter. "Oh God,"

I said and then laughed, causing him to look up at me. "Sorry, I just don't think God would approve of this situation." I laughed again.

Lucas gave me a voracious smile, his eyes burning, glowing the way they had when I'd seen him earlier.

The demon in him was coming out.

I cried out when I felt his tongue slide right inside me. It was impossibly long and moving in a way that felt weird, but amazingly good at the same time. I kept his head there as I groaned and moved my hips up and down, grinding into him, feeling the warmth spreading from in between my legs to the rest of my body. I didn't know if it was technique or the fact that he was a demon, but no one had ever made me feel like that before. Most of the guys I had been with up till that point didn't have much of a clue what they were doing. They were too young and inexperienced.

Lucas was far from inexperienced. He had probably already practiced on thousands of women. I had never felt anything like what he was doing to me and I soon felt myself cum. I cried out, clutching both my breasts as I felt hot fluid flow from me and into his mouth.

He came up licking his lips, his eyes glowing molten yellow. He kissed his way up my body, his mouth enveloping each of my swollen nipples before continuing to kiss his way up to my neck.

His glowing eyes locked onto mine and I stared right into them, like I was staring into the depths of Hell itself. His intense gaze pulled me in and I saw flashes of images, rapid depictions of demons and scenes that looked like Hell, of tortured souls and perverse acts of pleasure. I gasped in fear, but the pleasure countered the fear and Lucas smiled down at me like he knew what I was seeing.

Was he doing that on purpose? Did he want me to see where he came from?

His bulk looming over me, making me feel small and slightly vulnerable, I pulled his head down so he could kiss me and his tongue probed forcefully inside my mouth before pulling back, the tip gliding over my lips.

Power flowed through me as my Light Energy came to the fore, sensing I was in danger.

Maybe I was, but I didn't care. I had already abandoned myself to the strange fear-tinged pleasure of the situation.

I took him by surprise when I flipped him onto his back in one swift move, pinning him to the bed. He smiled in surprise and I flashed a devilish grin back at him. "Weren't expecting that, were you?" I said.

He mirrored my grin. “You’d make a great demon,” he said, his eyes eating into me, so much so that I wondered if he could see my soul somehow, that he could look beyond my physical form to the ethereal part of me beneath. My pulse quickened even more and my body vibrated with intense pleasure.

“Are you in my head?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

He seemed to enjoy me looking at him, like he needed the intimacy of eye contact. As a demon, I thought he would have been all about the physical act, the sheer animalistic pleasure. But I was wrong. Lucas enjoyed the connection. He had mentally attached himself to me so much that it felt like we were in our own universe with nothing in it but us. I liked that feeling because I could think of nothing else. I was as in the moment as I’d ever been having found the delicious escape I’d been looking for.

He gasped and I felt him squirm beneath me as I sucked hard him, massaging him at the same time, my eyes still on him. “Oh fuck,” he said.

I ached for him. I couldn’t wait any longer. I wanted him inside me. But something made me stop. “What about protection? I don’t want no demon babies.” I couldn’t help giggling at the thought.

“Relax,” he said, stroking my thighs with his large hands. “My demon seed won’t take in you.

As a Nephilim, your body will reject it.”

I gave it no further thought.

Straddling him, I guided him into me.

Oh my God!

We both gasped as I moved on top of him, sliding up and down on him, grinding my hips against him. I closed my eyes, taking great pleasure in how he felt inside of me. I took my time at first, enjoying the look of intensity on his face as I moved up and down on him.

Lucas’s whole body convulsed as I rode on top of him. I had never felt

so wet and any

reservations I had about having sex with a demon vanished, pushed out by the ecstasy that was sweeping us both away. I was about to cum again and a second later I cried out, my wetness gushing over him. My back arched, the pleasure so intense it took my breath away. Breathing hard, I fell forward onto him, unable to believe the force of my orgasm, like nothing I'd ever felt before. He gnawed on my neck and I ground my hips into him again, felt the elation build once more. His large hands gripped my ass as he pushed me down harder onto him and then just as suddenly as I had flipped him, he turned me over so I was on my back.

Lucas the demon grabbed both my legs before fucking me hard, forcing me to cum again. My eyes closed as I orgasmed and when I opened them again, I almost screamed once more because the Lucas I knew up to that point had gone and there instead was the demon, swirling yellow eyes glowing, a huge mouth filled with long sharp teeth and what looked like curling rams horns on either side of his head. Apart from the bone spurs that jutted out on both of his shoulders and elbows and his coal black skin the rest of his body still looked human, but possessing a power that no human could ever hope to have.

That was the real Lucas.

The demon Lucas.

The Light Energy in me practically seared me from the inside, burning me as it tried to get to the surface in an effort to protect me from the demon.

The combined sensations were almost unbearable as I looked upon Lucas' true form while he carried on moving on top of me. Not only was the pleasure still there, but a sense of fear had returned now that there was a beast on top of me. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he continued to thrust, impossibly big inside of me, his fierce burning eyes so intense it felt like they were burning holes in me. His mouth was open, revealing his pointed teeth—teeth that could tear me to shreds if he chose to use them. A thousand images flashed through my mind, some of which I had no idea where they even came from; scenes I had never witnessed but which still seemed real in my mind, scenes that were too unspeakable to describe, and underneath it all was the pleasure, the sheer, powerful, unadulterated bliss.

When he came, he pushed right into me and I screamed like I had never screamed before, the orgasm like a bomb going off inside me, the sensations so incredibly intense I thought I was going to die.

The demon on top of me howled, the reverberations of its deep and inhuman voice only adding to the orgasmic sensations that left my body shuddering uncontrollably.

I got lost in the ecstasy of the moment. I floated around in some other dimension, a place where nothing existed but me and my bliss, kind of like being back in the womb, but much dirtier.

When I finally opened my eyes to come back to reality the demon was gone.

Only Lucas remained.

I wasn't sure how to feel as I lay there in Lucas's bed, with him lying naked beside me. "I'm guessing that was your first time with a demon?" he said, clearly amused by my

disconcertedness. I wondered, since his time on earth, how many human women he had said that too.

"What do you think?" I said, still recovering from those Hell-shattering orgasms. I thought if he touched me again, I would explode.

"Hope it didn't scare you too much."

"I'm not scared of you." I wasn't, though maybe I should have been. He was a demon after all.

"As a demon I take offense at that."

"Take offense all you want."

He sat up. "Drink?"

"Yeah, why not." I got up off the bed and went to get dressed when he stopped me.

"Don't get dressed yet. I'm enjoying admiring your beautiful form."

I thought he was joking until I realized he wasn't, and that I was also getting a perverse kick out of seeing him walk around without *his* clothes on. I shouldn't have been, but I felt comfortable with Lucas.

I threw my clothes back on the floor and walked naked over to the table where he stood pouring vodka into two glasses. We drank in silence for a few moments, sort of admiring each other's bodies, even though I knew his didn't really belong to him.

"So who was the guy you stole that meat suit from?" I asked.

"Just a guy," he said. "Does it matter?"

I shook my head. "How often do you change suits then?"

"When I get bored with them, or when I need to be someone else."

"Don't go changing anytime soon."

He smiled. "I'll try not to."

I walked back to the bed and sat with my back against the headboard, staring into my glass. He came and sat beside me, bringing the bottle of vodka with him. "So," he said, refilling my glass,

"I sense you are struggling with something. Would you like to tell me what it is, now that we're friends?"

"Who said we're friends? We just slept together."

He put a hand to his chest as if I'd wounded him. "You just killed me."

I laughed. "Get a grip."

"I like you, Leia. I can't help it. You have the depth of a woman twice your age."

I looked at him to see if he was serious. Despite his constant look of amusement he seemed sincere, though that didn't mean I was going to start trusting him. "You're okay, I guess, for a demon."

"I'll take that as a compliment." He looked pleased as he refilled our glasses.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, as long as it isn't about what we discussed this afternoon with your uncle. I meant what I said. That shit is heavy and above my pay grade."

"Well, it is kind of. You remember my brother?"

“The one who was taken? I remember.”

“Well, he wasn’t just taken. Who ever took him made him into a demon.”

Lucas looked away, a grave expression on his face. “So he’s going through with his plan then.”

“You mean this Abigor character? Yes, he is. He practically killed my brother. Josh isn’t the same person anymore. He’s… nasty, horrible. And so… cold.”

“Wait, you’ve spoken to your brother? How? When?”

“We summoned him earlier.”

He nodded. “And as you managed to summon him, he must therefore be a demon.”

“Correct.”

“I see.” He was thinking.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just wondering what Abigor is up to. I’m wondering what the old dog plans on doing with this army he’s creating. Knowing Abigor it can’t be good.”

“That makes me feel much better, Lucas. Thanks.”

“It’s the truth. I told you before, I don’t lie.”

“I’m just having a hard time dealing with this on top of everything else. I was living in hope that I could get my brother back. I don’t think I can now.”

Lucas thought for a moment. “Maybe not.”

“What do you mean? If you know something, tell me.”

“Most demons are made in Hell. We were all human once, or angels. Our souls were made black in the pits of Hell after we fell or died, whichever. But that’s not the only way to make a demon.”

“Yeah, you mentioned before about feeding a person demon blood to turn them, like a vampire can turn a person. Frank talked about that

as well. He talked about drying a person out to make them normal again."

"That's one way, though I'm not sure if that will even work. Another way is to kill the demon who gave them the blood. Kill the demon that turned your brother and he may return to normal again."

I looked at him, half astonished. "You mean if we kill this Abigor fucker my brother will return to normal again?"

"Don't quote me on that. It's a long shot at best. It's just something I heard in Hell once. I've never heard of anyone actually doing it. And there's no guarantee your brother will return to normal again. My guess is that the longer he stays a demon, the harder it will be for him to regain his humanity."

I sat in silence for a long time, thinking. If Lucas was right then there was a chance that I could still get my brother back. There was a flicker of hope. I didn't care if it was a long shot, it was the only shot I had.

"Okay," I said finally. "So how do I kill this Abigor?"

Lucas looked at me like I was crazy. "Are you kidding? You have no idea what you'd be going up against. You can't just kill a demon like Abigor. It doesn't work that way. He can't be killed."

My heart sank. "Then why the fuck did you even tell me all that in the first place?" I got up off the bed and paced around the room, opening and closing my hands into fists.

"Hey, you asked," Lucas said. "I told you what I know."

I continued to pace around the room, my mind working overtime as I tried to figure out a solution to the problem. Not much was forthcoming. "This is bullshit," I said. "Everything can die, surely? Even demons."

"Look," said Lucas. "I don't know, honestly. I'm just saying if Abigor can be killed I've never heard of a way to do it."

"But that's not to say it can't be done." I picked my clothes up from off the floor. "I just have to find a way to do it."

"Good luck with that. You're leaving?"

“I can’t afford to waste anymore time.” I hastily put my clothes back on. “The longer I delay, the less chance I have of saving my brother.”

“Leia, babe…”

I flashed him a look. “Don’t call me that.”

“Okay. Just don’t get your hopes up on this. You don’t know this demon. I do.”

“What choice do I have? I’m not about to give up on my brother. No way.”

I headed for the door.

“Hey,” Lucas called after me. “No kiss goodbye?”

“Some other time. I’ve got a demon to kill.”

Chapter 19

Dawn's early light broke through the dark sky as I arrived at the cabin. It was quiet inside and no one stirred. I thought about grabbing a couple of hours sleep, but I had too much energy to sleep and my mind buzzed with thoughts about how I was going to kill Abigor, so I decided to go outside and train some more, thinking it might use up some of my excess energy. I had no idea sleeping with a demon could be so invigorating.

There was a slight chill in the air and just a mild breeze that felt good on my skin as I took my jacket off and tossed it to the ground beside the tree from which the heavy bag hung. I drew in a few deep lungful's of cold air and went to work hitting the bag with punches, kicks and various combinations of the two; doing as Frank had taught me and letting my instincts run the show, allowing the Light Energy to come through on every strike in a controlled way. Light Energy vibrated like a separate power source as I let it fuel my actions, amazed at how much speed and power I could actually attain with it. The heavy bag swung wildly from side to side as I abused it with everything I had for over an hour. When I finally stopped, I was barely out of breath. I felt strong, powerful, like I had just begun to tap into my abilities.

After I stopped hitting the bag, I stood for a few moments, taking in deep breaths. I thought of my mom's two short swords. I quietly went inside and retrieved them from my room before going back outside. For the next hour, I practiced wielding the swords until they felt comfortable in my hands. Then I started again, this time putting more focus and intent behind my actions.

After some time the swords were like extensions of my arms, like I could make them do

whatever I wanted. The whole time I practiced, I thought about Abigor. Even though I had no idea what this demon looked like, I imagined some sort of demonic-looking figure in front of me; that I was fighting this figure, avoiding its blows, slashing into it, stabbing it and finally slicing its head clean from its body.

I stopped at the sound of clapping behind me. I spun around and pointed the swords in the direction of the clapping. Eva stood there, dressed in skin tight black leggings and a black top that was just as fitted and running shoes on her feet. She looked fit, athletic, glowing

even, for that time of the morning. “How long have you been standing there?” I asked.

“Not long,” she said walking towards me. “I was about to take a run through the woods. You’re not bad with the swords, although you still need some work. Your footwork could be better.

Good balance is important.” I watched as Eva searched around for a moment until she found a large branch, which she picked up before facing me. “Attack me.”

“These are real swords.”

“Just attack me.”

If you say so.

I lunged forward with the swords, aiming one at her midsection. Eva neatly sidestepped my advance, parried the sword with the broken branch before redirecting the branch towards my neck where it stopped just inches from me. “Again,” she said, a playful look on her face.

This time I came at her with a downward slashing movement with one sword, quickly followed by an upward slash with the other, followed by a sideways slash with both. I was amazed as Eva effortlessly avoided every blow before slicing the branch across my stomach.

“How are you able to avoid me?”

“Footwork,” she said. “Footwork is everything when it comes to sword fighting. If you learn to use your feet properly you’ll make it hard for your opponent to hit you.” Suddenly she stepped forward and attacked me with various blows from her branch. I did my best to block and avoid them, but eventually I ended up off balance, which allowed her to land a killing blow to my neck. “See what I mean?”

“I see. I’ll keep practicing. What are doing up so early anyway?”

“I always rise early to train. Even though I’m not in the field much anymore, I still like to stay sharp.” She gave me a sly look. “More to the point, where have you been all night? Frank was worried.”

“I was just driving.”

“All night?”

“Pretty much. I may have stopped off to see someone.”

“And who would that be?” Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

I looked away. “No one you’d know.”

“I see. It’s like that, is it?”

“Like what?” I tried not to make things as awkward as they were and failed miserably.

She gave me a wry smile and shook her head. “I’m going for my run now.” I was glad to see her go as she nimbly ran off into the woods at a steady pace. I watched her until she disappeared out of sight, then I went inside the cabin to take a shower in case I smelled of demon.

After I got showered and dressed, I went into the living room and the first thing I noticed was the sweet skunky smell of marijuana. Eva sat in one of the armchairs by the fireplace, a book in her lap and a joint in one hand. She was still dressed in her figure-hugging black outfit. A lazy smile spread across her face when she saw me looking at her. “I didn’t have you pegged as a stoner,” I said to her.

“It helps me relax,” she said, offering me the joint. I declined and asked her where Frank was.

She said he was off on business again, which didn’t surprise me. Frank was always doing something or other. That suited me anyhow. It was Eva I wanted to talk to. I sat in the other chair opposite her.

“Sorry about last night. Seeing my brother like that, it all got too much for me.”

“That’s quite alright, I understand. This world that we inhabit can get quite overwhelming sometimes.”

“Tell me about it.” I paused for a second. “I need to talk to you about this Abigor character.”

Eva nodded. “Yes. I’ve been looking into him. I was up all last night actually, going through Frank’s books.”

“And?”

“Well,” she said opening up the small book that was in her lap. I could see stitching through the leather cover. The book looked handmade.

“Not a lot, I’m afraid. Abigor seems to be very elusive. Not much has been written about him. I found one passage in this old notebook, although there are still some more books I have to look through. Plus, I will check my own library later when I get home.”

“What does the passage say?” I sat forward and leaned on my knees so I could see the notebook.

The pages were yellowed and stiff and the ink looked faded. I couldn’t make out any of the writing. I wasn’t even sure if it was in English.

“This book was taken from the Vatican many years ago. It’s a demon encyclopedia of sorts. It was written a long time ago by one of our ancestors, I believe. It mentions Abigor but only briefly.” She looked down at the book. “According to this, Abigor was the architect of Hell.

Along with Lucifer, he was one of the first fallen ones and was tasked by Lucifer to design Hell, which he did. He was considered the greatest architect since God himself. His hellish vision has remained ever since. Lucifer made Abigor his commander-in-chief. It was Abigor’s job to oversee the demon armies of Hell, which explains why he is leading an army here on earth. By all accounts, Abigor was a ruthless leader and every demon in Hell feared him, including Lucifer.”

“Does it say if he can be killed or not?”

“It makes no mention of that here. Although if he really is that powerful, I doubt it.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I was holding on for dear life to the notion that Abigor could be killed, that he could be stopped. “So what are you saying, that we can’t stop him?”

“I don’t know yet. At the moment, it’s not looking too likely. That’s the reality I’m afraid.”

“I spoke with someone last night and they told me that my brother could be saved if the demon that turned him was killed. Is that true?”

“Who told you that?”

Lucas’ demon face flashed in my mind then and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “It doesn’t matter. I just want to know if it’s true.”

Eva considered for a moment as she exhaled the sweet smelling weed smoke. “It might be. I’ve never had to deal with a situation like the one your brother is in. Demons normally just possess, kill or torture people. Turning them into demons is not something I’ve encountered before. I’d need to research it.”

“It’s the only chance we have as far as I can see. We need to kill this bastard and return my brother and all the other Nephilim to normal.”

Eva gave me a look that indicated she was surprised and impressed at the same time. “There’s something different about you,” she said, her large eyes probing me. For a fearful second I thought she was going to suggest that I had gotten laid last night, but that wasn’t what she was getting at thankfully. “You seem more… strong-minded maybe.”

I shrugged. “I’m going to kill this demon if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Eva nodded approvingly. “There’s something else. We may be able to summon Abigor here.”

I thought about that for a moment. “So we can kill him you mean?”

“I was thinking more about talking to him. Find out what he wants, what his game plan is. Know your enemy and all that.”

That sounded dangerous to me, but not unthinkable. “You think that’d work?”

“No, but it’s worth a try. At the very least we’ll get a look at him up close, see exactly who we’re up against.”

“Have you told Frank this?”

“Not yet, but I will. I’m not sure he’ll be impressed by the idea. But then again, what choice do we have at this point?”

“I can do this alone, without involving any of you. I know it isn’t really your fight.”

Eva gave me a sharp look. “Nonsense, girl,” she said. “Of course this is our fight. It’s what we do. And your brother isn’t the only one who was taken. We have counted over a hundred

Nephilim children who have been taken so far, from all across the country. And that’s not even including those in the rest of the world.

This has seriously compromised our race. We're in danger of becoming extinct if this demon isn't stopped, so don't tell me this isn't our fight."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

Eva took a last pull on her joint before tossing the butt into the cold ashes in the fireplace. "As for summoning a demon like Abigor, we'll require some specific items that aren't easily obtained."

I frowned. "Like what?"

"One gallon of demon blood for starters, plus a hell hound's tooth and a few other things. Some of those things I already have at home. The rest will have to be found."

"The demon's blood? It can be from any demon?"

"No. It must come from a high-level demon."

"How high?"

"Not as high as Abigor but still high. Talk to Frank. He knows them all. I'll work on getting the rest of the items."

"So are we going to try and kill Abigor when we summon him?"

"I'm not sure if that would be wise. He may just kill us for trying."

"But we have to try surely."

"Listen, girl, there is a fine line between courage and foolish risk. Know the difference." She got up and left to shower after that, leaving me to stare into the ashes of the fire.

Later, after I'd come back from a walk in the woods, Eva's car was gone and Frank was behind the cabin, splitting logs with an axe.

"So did you talk to Eva?" I asked. "Did she tell you about her plan to summon Abigor?"

"She did." He placed a log on the large chopping block.

"And?"

"I think it's a bad idea." He brought the axe down on the log, splitting the wood with a loud thwacking sound. "But it's the only idea we

have, so…"

"Do we know any high-level demons who wouldn't mind donating some of their blood?"

"I know plenty of high-level demons." He stopped what he was doing. "None of which would donate even an ounce of their blood, at least not willingly."

"You mean we'd have to kill them."

"Yes."

"That suits me. Just pick one and we'll go get them. Sooner rather than later." Frank gave me a look. "What?"

"Nothing. Just wondering what happened to my niece."

"I just want my brother back. Nothing's going to stop me from doing that."

I could tell he thought I was being too optimistic as far as getting Josh back, but I didn't care.

Working on getting my brother back was the only thing keeping me from going insane. I'd also noticed thoughts of taking pills again creeping back into my mind, thoughts that hadn't shown themselves in the year since I'd gone clean. Without the drive to save my brother to keep me going, I'd have been straight to the nearest dealer. "I'm going to suit up," I said. "Find me when you are ready to leave."

Twenty minutes later, Frank met me in the cellar as I was strapping a demon-killing knife to my ankle.

"You really want to do this?" he asked.

"What do you think?"

"You realize we'd be taking a big risk bringing Abigor here. He may not be affected by the demon trap. He might just kill us then and there."

"I don't think so. Josh said he wanted me on his team. I'll play along for a while. See what he wants."

Frank held a Glock in his hand, checking it over. "This is a dangerous

game we're playing here. I hope you know that."

"You said it yourself, Frank. It's a game." I finished strapping the knife to my leg. "And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to win."

Chapter 20

Frank and I sat in the car outside a dilapidated building on the south side of the city. “That’s the building where Morgana is holed up,” Frank said. “It’s full of addicts; they shouldn’t pose much of a threat. They’ll be too smacked out to do anything.”

The demon Frank had chosen to go after as a blood donor was called Morgana. Morgana ran a kind of crack house for demons, only she didn’t sell crack; she provided her demon clientele with human blood in return for favors.

“Demons get high on human blood,” I said shaking my head. “Why does that not surprise me?”

Frank ignored me and went straight into the plan. “Morgana will have a few bodyguards around her, but that’s it, nothing we can’t handle between the two of us. The hard part comes when we have to try and tap Morgana for her blood. We’ll need to put sigils around the building as well, so she can’t teleport out. Once we confront her we have to use a binding spell so she can’t ditch her meat suit. Once we have that in place we can cut her throat and get what we need. She’s strong, though. She’ll kill us given half a chance, so it’s important we work together. No heroics.

Are we clear on that?”

“Crystal.”

“Good. Follow my lead on this and we shouldn’t have any problems.”

I waited by the car while Frank spray painted the sigils around the four sides of the building.

When he had finished, he came back to the car and tossed the spray can into the trunk. There was a plastic container in there, which I confiscated. We would need it to collect the demon blood.

“Ready?” he asked and I nodded affirmative.

The front door of the building was made of steel, designed to keep out unwelcome visitors.

“How do we get through that?” I asked.

“Watch and learn, kid.” Frank banged on the door, motioning for me to move to the side of him.

A moment later a small hatch opened near the top of the door. From my position I couldn’t see through, but I knew someone was looking out from the other side. Frank stood with his head down in front of the door. He uttered a couple of garbled words and just like that the door opened. Clearly he had given some sort of password for entry.

As the door opened, Frank hit it with an almighty kick, causing the door to fly back along with whoever was on the other side. He pulled his knife out as he rushed inside and I quickly followed suit.

I saw Frank stick his knife into the demon manning the door. The demon cried out, the now familiar orange light bursting from the chest wound as his meat suit fell to the floor at Frank’s feet.

“Frank!” I shouted. Two more demons ran down the stairs towards us. Frank slammed into the demon nearest him, pinning it against the wall. I slid out one of the short swords from inside my jacket and used it to skewer the demon that closed in on me. My eyes met the demon’s as I twisted the blade and pulled it out of his gut. That was the first time I’d killed anything and a weird feeling came over me as I stared down at the dead demon on the floor. My instinct was to feel bad, but I wouldn’t allow it. I did what I had to do and that was that. Killing is what my kind did. I had better get used to it.

Frank was on the stairs, wrestling with a demon in an oversized meat suit. The demon had Frank pinned to the wall, one hand around my uncle’s neck as it tried to squeeze the life out of him.

With his free hand, I saw Frank take his knife and ram it into the demon’s stomach before retracting the blade and shoving it hard up under its chin. He pulled out the knife and the demon fell heavily down the rest of the stairs like a mass of dead meat.

Frank stood breathing hard against the wall. “Having problems there?” I said.

He shook his head. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

We got to the first floor and headed down the hallway, checking rooms as we went. Most of the rooms were occupied by demons, but they posed no threat. They were either sitting on the floor or lying on stinking mattresses, their veins full of freshly injected human blood. They were as out of it as any human would be on heroin and no less

pathetic. Even demons had their vices.

What unsettled me more was the awful smell in the building. I noticed it as we went in, but it was much stronger on the floor with the addicts. It was a mixture of the familiar sulfur smell and decaying flesh with undertones of other stenches I couldn't quite place. It was a foul odor that reminded me of the basement where Frank and I had hunted the demon serial killer, the one who had almost killed me.

I covered my mouth and nose as we moved through the building. Frank didn't seem all that affected.

On the second floor it was more of the same, some rooms empty and some rooms with smacked out demons who didn't give a shit who we were or what we were doing there. The silence of the floor was punctuated only by low moaning sounds that came from the rooms housing the demon junkies. Occasionally I heard one of them speak, muttering garbled nonsense to itself.

The third floor was a different story.

The rooms on the third floor contained humans, in some cases two in each room. They lay unconscious on filthy old hospital beds. Each person had tubes coming out of their arms, their blood draining into bags that hung from metal IV stands. I walked into one of the rooms to find a boy, no more than sixteen or seventeen, lying naked and unconscious on a filthy looking gurney, his blood being slowly drained from him into a plastic bag. "This is fucking disgusting," I said to Frank. "We have to help these people."

"Help them how?" Frank asked, his own face full of disgust. "They're all unconscious. And anyway, that's not why we're here."

"I know, but… it's just a kid, for God's sake."

"I know it's not nice, but we have to go. Once we get Morgana's blood we can see about helping these people. Come on."

Reluctantly, I left the room and followed Frank into the hallway so we could make our way up to the next floor.

At the top of the stairs was a locked door that prevented us from going any further. It must have been where Morgana stayed. Plainly she didn't want her junkie customers disturbing her. Frank banged on the door and I readied myself with the sword, placing the plastic container on the floor beside me.

A second later I was surprised to see the door open. Maybe the demon who opened it thought it was one of its cronies we just killed or maybe it thought it was one of the junkie demons looking for another fix. Whatever the reason the demon looked shocked when it saw us and as it came forward through the door to attack, Frank stabbed it in the eye with his knife, burying the blade to the hilt in the socket, blood jetting out and spraying his face. More blood jetted over Frank as he pulled the blade out and the demon fell dead to the floor. I didn't have time to consider the gruesomeness of what I'd just seen. Frank quickly moved through the door, expecting more demons to come at us.

He was right.

Two more demons came running at us from down an immaculate hallway. The complete

difference in the place compared to the other two floors jarred me for a second and the next thing I knew, one of the demons, a woman, smacked me hard in the face. The blow made me stagger back into the open door and I dropped my sword on the floor along with the plastic container.

Frank was busy fighting the other demon so he couldn't help me.

I was on my own with this one.

The woman demon had one hand around my throat and was punching me in the face with the

other. I tasted blood in my mouth as her fist slammed into my face for the third or fourth time.

As dazed as I was I fought back, punching the demon on the side of the head with my fist which seemed to be having no effect, even with the Light Energy behind my blows.

The demon just smiled and hit me again and the back of my head slammed against the door I was up against, causing me to momentarily see stars. The bitch stood before me smiling, which was a mistake on her part, for it gave me time to reach into my jacket pocket and pull out the bottle of holy water that was there. Ever since the vampire incident, I decided I would never leave home without it. I popped the cap on the bottle and splashed the demon's face with the holy water just as she was about to come in and hit me again. It was satisfying to hear the demon's screams as the holy water burned into

her face. She staggered back, both hands clamped over face as acrid smoke rose from her, the smell of burning skin and flesh.

Before the demon could recover I rushed forward and emptied the whole bottle of holy water over her, causing her to burn and scream even more. As the demon fell to her knees, her face and neck looking like it was melting, I aimed a kick at her head, catching her under the chin, white light bursting from my foot. The demon's head snapped back and I heard a loud cracking sound just before she hit the floor and lay there unmoving.

I'd broken the demon's neck. Just to make sure I took my knife out and plunged it into her chest.

There were no screams from the demon, just a burst of orange light from the stab wound before she went limp.

Frank was on the floor not far from me, a demon on top of him, its hands wrapped around his throat. I was about to run over and help when he stuck his knife in the demon's neck, unleashing a jet of blood that matched the color of the walls. The demon released Frank's throat and grabbed its own neck to try and stem the blood and a second later it fell over dead into the wall. Frank sprang to his feet, out of breath. "At times like these I wish my powers were back at full strength."

"Frank!" I said. He looked up to see a woman standing at the end of the hallway. She stood in a room with a large window at her back, light pouring in around her.

It was Morgana, the demon we had come for.

"You have some nerve coming here," Morgana said in a voice that was calm but full of barely concealed rage. "You just signed your own death warrants. Idiots! Come and get me if you can."

With that, she went left and disappeared out of sight.

"When we get in that room, I'll say the incantation," Frank said, still struggling to catch his breath while I felt fine, apart from the raging headache the demon had given me. I still felt strong though, and the angelic energy pulsated through every inch of my body. "You just kill her. Got it?"

"Got it," I said, focused. My sword was back in my hand and I carried the container in the other.

We moved up the hallway and entered the room, hardly able to believe the opulence of the place compared to the filth pits in the floors below. The room was spotless and furnished with expensive furniture. It even had a bar in one corner.

Morgana sat in a white leather armchair. With her flowing red hair and white pantsuit she looked as beautiful and immaculate as the room we were in.

Frank didn't wait, immediately starting his recitation of the binding spell.

Morgana laughed and stood up. "I'll kill you before you've even finished the spell," she said.

Frank took his gun out and fired off four shots that hit Morgana dead center, the iron tips of the bullets the cause of the look of pain on her face.

She looked down at the bullet holes in her chest and the blood seeping from the wounds. "You just ruined this suit," she said and I wasn't sure if she was talking about her clothes or the body she possessed.

Either way, she wasn't happy.

She shot out an arm in Frank's direction and Frank dropped his gun and grabbed at his own throat as if someone was choking him. The demon raised her arm higher and the next thing I knew Frank has hovering three feet off the floor, still grasping at his throat.

I knew if I didn't do something she would kill him, but Frank was way ahead of me as he took out his knife and threw it at the demon. The knife stuck in her chest and Frank dropped to the floor, coughing and spluttering before continuing with the binding spell.

The demon screamed with pain and rage as she pulled the knife from her chest and threw it back at Frank, who ducked just in time, the knife sailing past him and lodging itself in the drywall behind him.

Still he kept up with the spell, which I knew was working because I could see the panic in the demon's eyes.

As Frank said the last few words of the spell, I ran forward with my sword out in front of me, intending to run it through her. A bit of a gung-ho move, but I wasn't thinking. The point of my blade inches away from her, Morgana sidestepped causing me to overreach and

miss her.

The next thing I felt was her forearm around my throat as she held me up off the ground with one arm, taking my sword in her other hand and tossing it away.

“Let her go!” Frank shouted, having finished the spell. The demon couldn’t leave her meat suit now.

She was trapped.

And so were we.

“No further or I break the pretty one’s neck,” Morgana said. I struggled against her grip, but I had no leverage as my feet were not even on the floor. I practically hung from the noose her arm was making. My head spun as she squeezed tighter. “Stand aside. You let me leave and I might let her live.”

“Okay, okay,” Frank said. “Just let the girl go.”

Anger flashed through me on hearing Frank say that. I thought to myself that we had come this far, that I wasn’t about to let him allow this bitch to walk out of there just like that.

No way. I needed the demon blood and I was going to get it.

Keep her attention, Frank.

I had a knife strapped to my right ankle. As light-headed as I was, I swung my leg up straight, reached out and pulled the knife from the straps that held it.

By the time she knew what I was up to it was too late. I stabbed the knife back behind me and felt it sink into soft flesh.

The demon screamed and I dropped to the floor and rolled forward to my feet, the knife still in my hand, dripping with demon blood.

When I turned around I saw the demon holding her neck. Blood squirted out in thick arcs all over the floor and furniture. She may have been able to withstand her other wounds, but this one was too much for her.

She fell to her knees. I ran forward and stuck my boot in her chest, slamming her into the floor, then I knelt on top of her, my knee pinning her down.

“Hold her!” Frank shouted.

Frank was there with the container. He lifted the demon’s head and placed it over the bucket, allowing blood from her neck to flow into the container.

Morgana didn’t put any fight up as Frank held her head and filled the bucket with her demon blood.

“You think you’re so smart,” she said to us choking on her own blood. “You know nothing. Soon enough everything you know will be gone.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked her.

“Hell is coming,” she said, laughing, still choking on her own blood. “Hell is coming and you can’t stop it.”

The bucket was over half full. More than enough for what we needed.

“Time to shut this bitch up,” Frank said. “You remember the exorcism spell?”

Frank had made me learn the spell a few days ago. “I think so.”

“Hit her with it.”

I thought for a second and started reciting the Latin words of the spell that would send Morgana back to Hell where she belonged. “Exorciza muste, omnisim mundus spiritus, omnissa

tanicapotestas…”

“No, no…” she protested when she realized what I was doing. I ignored her, carried on with the spell and then a great plume of yellow smoke screamed from her mouth and headed downwards through the floor as her demon spirit got sucked back to Hell.

“You actually remembered the words,” Frank said.

“I told you I would, didn’t I?” I stood up and grabbed the container filled with Morgana’s blood.

“Try not to spill any. I don’t like the idea of doing this again.”

“Anyone would think you were getting too old for this, Frank.”

“Just because you’re my niece doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass for

your insolence.” He wasn’t smiling, but I saw the twinkle in his eyes.

“What about the people below us?”

He considered for a moment. “We’ll call an ambulance.”

I shook my head. “You’re all heart, Frank.”

Chapter 21

Sitting in the car outside the building, Frank called Eva and told her to meet us at the cabin.

“Good job in there, by the way,” he said to me afterwards.

“Thanks,” I said and it occurred to me just how much things had changed in such a short space of time. I had been through some horrible—not to mention terrifying—experiences, but I also felt like my life was finally starting to make some sort of sense; however messed up my

circumstances might have been. I still struggled to wrap my head around it all, but I was moving towards something. I was on a path that held meaning and that was something I never had before.

Since my parents were killed, I struggled to find an identity, which was made harder by having to move from one foster home to the next, never having anywhere I could call home; a place from which to build a real identity beyond the shallow ‘foster kid’ persona I was often tagged with. Despite the adverse circumstances, being a Watcher—a Nephilim—was the closest thing I’d ever had to a real identity.

I was in the game.

More than that, I played to win.

“You looked like you had fun.” Eva arrived at the cabin about half an hour after us. I was sitting opposite Frank in the living room, both of us drinking beer. Shockingly, I was developing a taste for the stuff. Eva stared at my face, examined the bruises there.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Frank got it worse than I did. He’s old, you see.”

Frank didn’t look amused by my prodding. He threw me a look, but said nothing. He still treaded lightly after the argument I had with him at Eva’s house that night.

I got up to show Eva the bucket of demon’s blood that sat in the middle of the kitchen floor.

“Did you bring what else we need, Eva?”

“Yes. The ingredients are out in the car.” She picked an apple from a bowl of fruit and bit into it.

“How’d it go with Morgana? Not too easy I’m guessing?”

“Piece of cake,” Frank said from his chair.

“I think Leia is right,” Eva said, winking at me. “Maybe you are getting too old, Frank.”

“You’re the same age as me, don’t forget.”

“I am, but I’m much better looking, dear.”

As cute as that little exchange was, I didn’t have time for Frank and Eva to play whatever game they were playing. “Morgana told us something,” I said to her.

She finished smiling at Frank and looked at me. “I’m sure she told you plenty. Any of it useful?”

“She kept saying that Hell was coming and there was nothing we could do about it. Any idea what she could be talking about?” I didn’t wait for her to answer. “I think something bad is going to happen soon, that’s what I think, something big and we need to stop it.”

“Okay, you need to slow down,” Eva said. “We can only do one thing at a time. Let’s deal with this summoning first, then we’ll think about that.”

“But I can’t help thinking it’s all related, that maybe Abigor is connected to this somehow.

Maybe that’s what he’s planning, maybe he’s planning to end the world or something.” I was annoyed at the fact that there was much we still didn’t know and that we might not know until it was too late.

“I think you should go and get cleaned up,” Eva said. “Frank and I can set things up for the summoning.”

I gave her a harsh look. “What are you, my mother?” I couldn’t help it. My frustration got the better of me.

“I’m just saying, you’ve got the post-fight jitters.” Eva’s clear blue eyes ate into me. “Take some time, get your head straight.”

I continued to stare at her as she remained calm and collected in the

face of my agitation. In the end, I just shook my head and went to my bedroom.

In the bedroom my anger soon subsided when I looked in the mirror and saw the extent of my injuries. I had a large purple bruise on my cheek bone and a cut on my lower lip that still seeped blood. There was also dried blood around my nostrils and further smears over the rest of my face. My hands were also sore and bloody from all the fighting.

All in all, I looked like I went twelve rounds with a bare knuckle boxer. “Jesus, what a mess,” I said to the mirror. I stripped my clothes off, which were covered in blood, although I was pretty sure most of it wasn’t mine.

When I stripped down to my underwear I stood in front of the mirror. Apart from a number of dark bruises and a few scrapes, I seemed to be in decent repair. I wasn’t too worried anyway, as I knew I would heal up pretty quickly.

Standing in the shower, the hot water washing the blood from my face and body, the only thing that was going around in my head was the phrase *“Hell is coming,”* over and over like a mantra, and I kept wondering what it meant, coming up with no answers except the obvious: that Hell really was coming.

I stood in the cellar a while later, waiting. Eva was preparing all the ingredients for the summoning spell. Frank and I watched as she mixed up some of the demon’s blood in the same large bowl she had used in Josh’s summoning, adding in further ingredients. Pretty soon a light smoke was rising from the bowl, along with a smell that reminded me of sour milk. Thinking I was going to gag, I covered my mouth and nose with one hand.

“We’re ready to proceed,” Eva said finally.

Adrenaline churned up my stomach when she said that and I tensed up and nodded.

“Remember,” Frank said. “Stay on guard. We’re not even sure if that demon trap will hold this guy. There’d be nothing to stop him from killing us all right here.”

At that Eva spoke the incantation that would send Abigor the call. “Attenrob endumeos, ad consiendrum…”

Halfway through the spell I felt a sudden shift in the temperature of the room, like someone had just turned the heat up. It grew hotter the closer Eva got to finishing the spell. By the time she finished, beads of sweat ran down my forehead.

Once I caught the unmistakable whiff of sulfur, my right hand went to the sword in my jacket, gripping the handle tight.

He's coming.

A second later there he was, Abigor, stood in the middle of the demon trap.

I froze because I recognized him immediately. "You!" I said.

"Yes, me," Abigor said back, a broad smile on his face.

It had been him standing down the street the night Diane was killed and Josh was taken. I didn't get a decent look at him at the time, but I remembered how his presence felt, just like it did now.

Abigor had wavy dirty blonde hair that was greased back from his forehead and eyes that were clear and arctic blue with a wicked look in them. He was dressed all in black with a shirt that buttoned right to the neck and a leather coat that fell just past his waist. You would almost think he was wearing some kind of paramilitary uniform, which, given the fact that he was training demons to fight in his army, would make sense. In fact, that's what he reminded me of, a General. A demon General.

He stood there in silence as he looked at each of us in turn, taking us in, taking the room in.

When his eyes stopped on me he smiled, causing adrenaline to shoot through me. "And there you are," he said. "Josh's twin sister. Leia isn't it? I've been looking forward to meeting you properly since that night we saw each other. Did you enjoy the glimpse of Hell, I gave you?" His voice was calm and measured with more than a hint of arrogance in it. His whole demeanor spoke of conceit, which didn't surprise me.

I said nothing, just stared at the man—the demon—who had taken my brother from me. I wanted to draw my sword and run the blade through his chest, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. He stared back at me and smiled, as if he knew what I was thinking. "Well, this is cozy, isn't it?" he said.

“Abigor, I presume?” Eva asked him.

“You can call me that if you want,” he answered. He looked down at the demon trap he was standing in then looked up at us as he casually walked out of the circle. Everyone drew their weapons. “Relax, I’m not going to kill anyone. If I’d wanted to do that you’d all be dead by now, you can lower your weapons. You brought me here to talk, right? So let’s talk.”

Slowly I lowered my sword down as Abigor walked by each of us in turn, first Frank, then Eva and finally me. He stopped when he got to me. “Aren’t you a lovely specimen,” he said. “Very lovely indeed. You look like your brother.”

“What the hell have you done with him?” I asked, unable to keep a slight tremor out of my voice.

Abigor was like no other demon I had ever met. His presence was such that just being near him instilled fear. I got the impression that if he clicked his fingers all of us would explode on the spot in a shower of blood and guts. Whether he had that kind of power I didn’t know, but it sure seemed like he did.

“You know what I’ve done with him,” he said. “I’ve made him a commanding officer in my

army.”

“You demonized an innocent boy,” Frank said, as usual, refusing to show any fear or respect.

“Yes.” Abigor walked back into the demon trap as he paced casually around the room like he was conducting a company meeting. “That I did. I demonized a lot of people.”

“Why?” Eva asked. “Why are you using Nephilim children?”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” he said. “Because they are strong and powerful already. Demonizing them only makes them more so. Plus, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t get a certain kick out of turning your own children against you.”

“That’s your plan? To unleash your demon army on the world?”

The smile on his face unsettled me. “There’s more to my plan than just that. Much more. But you’ll discover that soon enough.”

“Hell is coming,” I said quietly.

“What?” Abigor stared at me with eyes that glowed a deep orange color.

I swallowed. “I said Hell is coming.” My voice was low, respectful, even though respect was the last thing I had for the monster who stole my brother. “What does that mean?”

“Where’d you hear that?” he asked, his face darkening further.

“A demon, just before we killed it.”

Abigor shook his head angrily. “Demons,” he said. “You can’t trust them to keep their mouths *shut*.” He paced around for a moment, clearly fuming, then relaxed suddenly. His clearly taciturn nature made me even more uneasy. “I’ll tell you what,” he said and he held out his hand towards me. “Why don’t you come with me now and I might let you in on the plan. How’s that sound?”

“No,” Frank said. “No way.”

Abigor shot Frank a look with his lava orange eyes. Frank couldn’t help but stagger back a step, fear on his face for the first time. “I wasn’t asking you.” He looked back at me, his eyes back to blue again. “Well? This is a one-time offer, Leia. I’ll even let you speak to your brother.”

“My brother is gone,” I said.

“Not gone. Just different. Better, as you can be too. Just come with me and I’ll explain everything. Trust me, I’ll bring you right back again.”

“Leia, no,” Frank said. “You can’t trust this demon sonofabitch.”

But my mind was already made up. We weren’t going to get anything from Abigor in that cellar.

I had to go with him in the hope that maybe he would tell me something useful that we could use. He was the enemy and I had to find out all I could about him. If that meant going wherever he wanted to take me, then so be it. Eva and Frank still protesting, I dropped my sword to the floor and walked forward, took his hand, which felt cold and dry. “Good girl,” he said just before he teleported us both out of the room.

Chapter 22

Only a split second before, I was standing in the cellar with Frank and Eva. But now I found myself standing on some sort of iron-gridded walkway inside a huge warehouse with Abigor standing right beside me, looking relaxed and at ease. “Quite a rush, isn’t it?” he said. I instinctively took a step away from him. “Relax, Leia.” He looked out into the warehouse. “I’m not going to hurt you. I only brought you here to talk, and to show you.”

“Show me what?” I asked. I was light-headed after the teleport, so I was slightly disoriented.The sulfurous smell that hung thick in the air didn’t help either. I placed one hand on the iron railing for balance while I got my bearings.

“Look.” He gestured out in front of him to the warehouse floor below.

I stared out into the warehouse from the high walkway down below to the ground floor where I saw people—a lot of them. There must have been over a hundred of them down there doing

some kind of training, like soldiers in a paramilitary camp. “What is this?”

“This is my training camp and those are all my recruits.” He sounded proud, like a football coach displaying his winning team.

“You mean all the Nephilim kids you stole and demonized?”

“Stole?” He laughed. “Most of them came willingly.”

“Bullshit.” I shook my head. “Why would they go with you willingly?”

“Because I promised them something better. I offered them power and prestige and they took it.”

“I can’t believe that. My brother? There’s no way he would have gone with you willingly.” The very thought that Josh had joined Abigor by choice made me sick to my stomach. He was lying.

He had to be lying.

“Granted, he fought in the beginning, but he gave in once I explained things to him. He wasn’t as happy as you thought he was. Once I showed him what he could achieve—what I could give

him—he took it with both hands. That's the truth."

"No, you're lying…"

"Believe what you want." He came across like he didn't care what I thought. He had his recruits and that was all that mattered to him. "The fact is they are all here and ready to fight for me."

I looked down at Abigor's army of demonized soldiers. They appeared to be organized into small groups, with some groups practicing hand to hand combat, others doing weapons training while still others practiced killing farm animals with their bare hands. I looked on, disgusted, as one recruit got hold of a terrified goat and picked it up by the horns, holding it aloft before ramming his hand into the animal's stomach, ripping its insides out, a steaming mess of blood and entrails spilling on the floor around his feet. Once it was done, he tossed the animal like a bag of rubbish into a huge pile of other dead animal carcasses. I couldn't help thinking of Bane, of how the dog killed in the same way. "This is sick," I said, shaking my head. "*You're* sick."

Ignoring me he said, "Look over there," and he pointed to the far end of the warehouse. I looked over and recognized Josh. Like all the other recruits, he was dressed in black, but he seemed to be giving orders. My face tightened as I watched with a mixture of sadness and horror as Josh telekinetically lifted up one of the recruits by the throat and threw him against the wall. Then he ordered two other recruits to go beat the guy up, which they did, inflicting a vicious beating on him. I had no idea if the kid had done something wrong or if this was Abigor's way of

toughening up his recruits. Either way I was sickened. "Josh is a hard taskmaster. That's why he's my best recruit and my commanding officer."

I could only stand there shaking my head at what my brother had become and at what Abigor had done to the rest of those kids. My eyes watered, but I held back the tears. I wasn't about to show my weakness in front of Abigor.

"You can join him, Leia," he said. "There's a place here for you, alongside Josh and me. The things we could accomplish together, it would be magnificent. I have many other training camps like this around the world, this isn't the only one. I could use someone like you to help me run it all."

My jaw clenched as rage threatened to overwhelm me. “Never.”

“There’s great power in you, Leia.” He came closer to me and I instinctively stepped away from him. “You don’t even know how much power is inside you yet. You could be great, I could make you great.”

“To what end?” My body was so tense that I shook. “What are you planning on using all these…

recruits for?” Abigor just smiled like he was enjoying keeping the secret from me. “Well, go on.

What’s your grand plan?”

“How much do you know about me?” he asked finally. “Did you know I was the architect who designed Hell? That Hell was based entirely on my vision? Of course it existed a long time before I ever got there, but it was just a wasteland, nothing more. I made it *great*. Hell was mine for a long time. Lucifer was just a figurehead. I ran that place until it all started to fall apart thanks to the petty machinations of lower-level bureaucrats.” Lava swirled in his eyes as he gripped the railing with both hands. “They were only out for themselves and they eventually ruined the place, ruined the vision I had kept in place for so long. There’s no order down there anymore. It’s every demon for itself and chaos rules. The current King of Hell is more concerned with his own interests than he is of Hell itself.” He looked at me for a long moment, like he was about to tell me something else, then he looked away. “Anyway, things have changed.”

“I thought that would have suited you. Don’t demons thrive on chaos?”

“A common misconception. Demons need order just like humans do or else nothing works

properly and no one ends up getting what they want. Take a look around your own world, Leia.

Do you see much order? Or does chaos rule in most parts of the world?” He took a step closer to me and I resisted the urge to step back this time, just out of sheer defiance. “The human world is falling apart the way Hell did and pretty soon there is going to be total chaos here and no one will get what they want, not even demons. It’s all happening right under your noses and you don’t even see it.”

“All I see is a demon with delusions of grandeur,” I said, unable to help myself. “What are you saying, Abigor? That you want to rule over earth?”

“More than that, I want to bring Hell *to* earth.”

“Hell is coming.” I echoed the words I’d heard before.

“Indeed it is. And there’s nothing you can do to stop it. I’m bringing Hell to you. I’m going to create a new Hell with a new vision and I’m going to do it right here on earth.” He raised his arms as if in praise. “I’m bringing order to the chaos finally.”

“You sound just like a politician,” I told him. “Full of shit.”

His eyes flashed orange at me. “Don’t test me,” he said. “I could kill you right here. Better yet, I could have Josh kill you right here and he would do it without hesitation because I asked him to.”

Fear did its best to overcome me in that moment, but I fought it back down and defiantly held his gaze, which wasn’t easy, let me tell you.

“I know what you’re thinking. I can read your thoughts. You want to kill me, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good luck with that. There is only one thing in this universe that can kill me and I doubt you’d be willing to trade your soul to get it.” He looked away from me and leaned once more on the railing, surveying his recruits like some sort of demonic despot. “I’m giving you a choice. Rule with me or be ruled. That’s it.” He looked at me as if I was going to give him an answer right there and then. I just shook my head.

“You know I won’t join you. Why are you even asking?”

“Because I’m a fair demon.I don’t dictate, I give people choices.”

“And bringing Hell to earth, that’s giving people a choice?”

“Humans have already made their choice. They chose chaos. They chose disorder. They chose freedom not knowing they were actually choosing the bonds of slavery. It’s too late for humans now. It’s not too late for you, though. I could show you how to use that power inside you. I can show you how to put it to good use.”

“In helping you?” I said. “No thanks. I’ll take my chances with the rest of humanity.”

“Such a waste.” He shook his head in disgust. “I tried.” He took a deep breath before speaking again. “In three days time the gates of Hell will be opened and Hell will spill onto the earth.

That’s how much time you have left. Enjoy it while you can because the world as you know it will soon be no more. Goodbye, Leia.” He clicked his fingers and a split second later I found myself back at the cabin, standing in the cellar with Frank and Eva, who both looked at me with dazed expressions. I didn’t think either of them expected to see me again.

“What happened?” Frank asked me.

“We’re all screwed,” I said.

Chapter 23

“Three goddamn days!” Frank paced around the cellar in the cabin, rubbing at his stubble and shaking his head. I’d just informed him and Eva about my meeting with Abigor, about the training camp at the warehouse, the demon’s plan to bring Hell on earth and the most depressing fact of all—that we couldn’t kill or stop the architect of Hell. The two of them seemed to be in shock as the information sank in.

“He can’t really do that, can he?” I asked Eva, a glass of whiskey in my hand that Frank had poured for me from his stash down with the weapons. . “Can he really bring Hell to earth?”

Eva sipped from her own glass. “He talked about opening the gates of Hell?”

I nodded. “In three days’ time.”

“There are gates of Hell all over the world. It could be any of them.” Eva shook her head and started her own pacing, a look of deep concern on her face.

“So how do we find out which one?” Frank said. “And how do we know he isn’t planning on opening all of them?”

“I doubt that,” Eva said. “All the gates were sealed a long, long time ago by the angels. For every set of gates there are six-hundred and sixty-six seals to be broken before the gates can be opened.

As there are rumored to be at least twenty different gates, that would be a lot of seals. Abigor only needs one gate open to fulfill his plan. It would take him long enough to break the seals for just one. He’s evidently been working on this plan for a long time now. How did we not hear of this before?”

Frank shook his head. “I don’t know. Strange things happen all the time. How could we know to connect them to that?”

“Wait,” I said. “What are these seals and what happens when you break them?”

“Every seal is different,” Eva said. “And they involve lots of different things, lots of events occurring, like freak weather, earthquakes,

strange deaths, unusual paranormal activity…

anything really. It's a broad spectrum of things and hard to find any kind of pattern in."

"But there has to be some kind of pattern though." I said. "If we can find a pattern happening in a certain area then we could pinpoint the gate that Abigor is trying to open, right?"

"I suppose," Eva said. "But what do we do when we find the gate? How do we stop him? He can't be killed and he has a whole army on his side."

"You have a point," Frank said. "How the hell do we stop him?"

Eva shook her head. "I don't know. You'll have to let the other Watchers know, see if they can help. At the very least they can give us back up if we have to fight."

I slammed my glass down on the bench underneath where the guns were hanging. "Is that the best you guys can come up with? Leave it to the other Watchers? I can't just sit around and wait for all this to happen without doing a damned thing to stop it." I glared at them, making sure they felt the measure of my rage.

"So what do you suggest?" Frank said, the tone of his voice clearly conveying he didn't expect any decent answer to that question.

"Everything can die," I said, ignoring Frank's sarcasm. "Even God can die if some people are to be believed. Abigor must be able to die. He said there is only one thing in the world that can kill him, and he doubted I would trade my soul to get it, which means there's something out there we can use."

"And what if there is?" Frank asked. "Do we just trade our souls to get this thing? How do we know he isn't lying so we waste time looking?"

"I don't know, Frank," I said, throwing him a scornful look. "I'm trying to be helpful here. Fuck you and your fucking cynicism, alright?" I barged past Eva, who sighed and called after me as I left the cellar.

I stood in the kitchen, glaring out the window, face flushed as I struggled to control my frustration. I picked up an empty glass from the sink and threw it at the wall beside me, letting out a scream as I did so. Tears flowed as I stomped around the kitchen, grabbing plates

and saucepans and whatever else I could get my hands on to throw around the room. “Fuck!” I threw a plate at the wall and it shattered into small pieces over the stove. I grabbed another plate and just as I threw it at the far wall in the living room, Frank walked in.

“What the hell, Leia?” he exclaimed, cowering as pieces of ceramic rained over him. “Shit, sorry Frank,” I said, involuntarily laughing at his reaction and crying at the same time.

He stood for a second, brushing pieces of broken plate out of his hair before he walked towards me. “It’s okay. You’re upset.”

“I just miss my brother. I don’t think I’m ever going to see him again.” I stood, at a loss as to what to do or how to feel. He put his arms around me and held me tightly. He said nothing, just held me for what seemed like a long time and I allowed him to. It was probably the first real connection I’d had with him. “I’m sorry,” I said, pulling away.

“Stop saying ‘sorry.’ I know how hard you’re finding this.”

“I’m being selfish. The whole world is at stake and I can only think of one person.”

He put a rough hand to the side of my face and held it there. “Forget it. I feel just as bad.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head, awkwardness creeping back into his demeanor. “I was thinking about what you said the other day… if I’d taken you and Josh after your parents died, maybe none of this would be happening right now.”

I smiled at him, suddenly feeling bad for the way I’d been treating him of late. “Don’t blame yourself, Frank. You made what you thought was the right choice at the time. And anyway, Abigor would still be going ahead with his plan no matter what.”

He gave a small smile back. “I guess so.”

At that moment I almost forgave Frank for what he and my mother did to my father.

Almost.

For the next few hours Frank trawled the internet looking for patterns

that would lead us to the location of the Hell Gate, while Eva and I looked through book after book trying to find out if anything existed to kill Abigor with. It was a hard slog and as time went on we became

increasingly more despondent, especially since we knew that time was no longer on our side.

After nearly four hours of research, we came up empty as far as finding anything to kill Abigor.

Frank did make some progress, and thought that he had discovered a pattern that might indicate broken seals.

“Where?” Eva said as we looked at the laptop Frank was sitting by at the breakfast bar.

“In the city believe it or not,” Frank said. “I thought it was the obvious place to look first. Seems I was right.”

“Go on.”

“There has been a lot of activity around the city for the last ten years or so, which is no surprise to us, but on the west side there seems to have been more than usual.” He paused to drink from the beer he held. “Strange happenings, unusual deaths and lately some freak weather activity that no one seems able to explain. Just last year it rained blood for two days straight. I remember that happening, actually, over the old cemetery. People were freaked out.”

“And you didn’t think that unusual at the time, either of you?” I said.

Frank shrugged. “I’ve seen stranger things than that. I thought it was some demon trick. They like doing that sometimes to freak people out. They feed off the fear and panic.”

“There’s a Hell Gate in that old necropolis,” Eva said.

“You know this for a fact?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “It’s marked in one of my books at home, with the rest of the Hell Gates around the world.”

“So how many seals are left to break before Abigor can open the gates?”

“Well, given that Abigor said three days to open the gates, there can’t be many more seals left.

Maybe one or two if we're lucky."

"That's not good," Frank said. "How the hell are we supposed to stop this from happening if we don't even know what the seals are?"

None of this was making me feel very optimistic and I couldn't shake the sinking feeling I had in the pit of my stomach. "There must be a way to find out what the last seals are," I said.

"There is," Eva said and turned to look at Frank. "You'll have to contact Rothstein."

"Who the hell is Rothstein?" I asked.

"Rothstein used to be head of the High Council," Eva explained. "The High Council used to run the Watchers around the world."

"Tell us what to do, in other words," Frank interjected.

"Until, that is, the whole organization fell apart due to in-fighting and politics."

"Good riddance," Frank said. "Bunch of angel huggers."

"Angel huggers?" I said

"The High Council members would communicate with the archangels," Eva said. "They would take orders from them. Jack Rothstein did most of the talking, but the angels, they played this little game, where they pitted all the council members against each other, just for fun. Anyway, it all fell apart, but Rothstein apparently still talks to a few of the less nefarious angels on occasion.

He may be able to get us the information we need."

"Alright," I said, feeling optimistic. "Call him up then."

A while later, Frank got a call while we were still in the cabin, scouring the internet and looking through more books that he had pulled up from the cellar. So far we hadn't found anything helpful. Eva was gone; she wanted to check her own library at home. I stared at Frank until he put the phone down. "Well?" I said, leaning forward in my seat by the fireplace.

"Fucking angels," he said scowling. He looked dejected as he slumped down in the seat opposite me.

“What?”

“Rothstein found the list of seals for the cemetery Hell Gate. But the last seal isn’t written.

Apparently the angels didn’t want anyone to know what it is.” Frank shook his head, his jaw clenched. “I told you, angels are assholes.”

I threw my head back and sighed. “Why didn’t this Rothstein just ask the angels?”

“He did, but they told him nothing. You have to understand, angels don’t like Nephilim. They don’t like us having any power and they consider humans to be talking monkeys, including us. I don’t think they’d be bothered if the Hell Gate was opened. It would give them an excuse to come down here and fight a war, which is what they like doing most.”

I listened with wide eyes. “So what the hell was the point of creating the seals in the first place if they couldn’t care less?”

“Orders, I guess. Who knows?” Frank shrugged and went and poured himself another drink.

I fell back into my chair. “This just gets better and better, doesn’t it?”

“We still have time. We’ll think of something.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Time to do what, Frank? Read every book in this damned cabin?

We’re never going to find out how to kill Abigor in these books. We need to do something else.”

“And what do you suggest, Leia?” He scowled at me, whiskey in hand. “I’m all ears. If you have some brilliant idea that’s drawn from your vast experience in these matters then please, do tell.”

I looked away from him and said nothing. I wanted to scream at him, tell him what he could do with his sarcasm, but he was right. I had been thrust into the Watcher life, not even a week ago, so I wasn’t exactly experienced, as he pointed out.

Yet our fates felt like they rested squarely on my shoulders for some reason. I didn’t know whether that was because of Josh or because Abigor had chosen to reveal his plan to me, but I somehow felt

responsible for resolving the crisis we were in, if crisis could even begin to describe the clusterfuck we found ourselves in.

“We have to stay calm here,” he said coming to sit back down with a refilled whiskey glass in hand. “Let’s just keep hitting the books. Something will turn up. It always does.”

I stood up. “I need to rest for a while.” That was a lie, but I needed time alone. I lifted a book from the pile on the floor and tucked it under my arm. “I’ll keep reading in my room.”

Frank didn’t protest when I left and headed for my room, probably glad to be rid of me for a while. The real reason I left him was because I had decided to take more extreme measures.

I was going to sell my soul in return for access to the weapon that could kill Abigor.

The book I took to my room contained the instructions for summoning the crossroad demon to make the deal with. I didn’t say anything to Frank because I didn’t want to argue with him over it.

When I got to my room, I locked the door, sat on my bed, and started leafing through the pages, trying to find what I had come across earlier. After much fretting and thinking I had lifted the wrong book, I finally found what I was looking for.

According to the book you could use the ritual to summon a demon at a crossroads and that demon would grant you whatever you wanted.

I had been thinking about going down that route ever since Abigor mentioned it. It wasn’t something I wanted to do, but at that point I didn’t see any other choices. Frank and Eva had come up empty so far and there was little time left. Drastic measures were called for.

It was my soul—one soul—in return for possibly saving the world from literally going to Hell.

There was no debate as far as I was concerned. Frank would have protested if I’d told him and then we would have debated it for God knows how long, before deciding who was going to be the martyr and sacrifice their soul.

There was no time for all that.

I checked the book to see what I’d need to summon the crossroads

demon. The items involved in the ritual were fairly straightforward. I could sneak into the cellar where Frank kept all his potions and spell ingredients and get what I needed. I could then sneak out and go find a crossroads somewhere.

Ripping out the page with the ritual on it, I left my room and went down into the cellar where the spell ingredients were. It took me only a few minutes to get what I needed and I kept listening out for Frank in case he came down and caught me.

When I had what I needed, I climbed out the small window in the cellar, barely squeezing through the narrow gap and out onto the gravel, and from there I walked quickly to the Mustang which was parked just a dozen yards away.

When I got in the car, I soon discovered the keys were not in the ignition.

What the hell?

I had left them there so where were they?

I jumped when I heard a knock at the window. Frank stood outside, dangling the car keys. I wound the window down.

“Looking for these?” he said. “What’s going on? You thought I wouldn’t see you run out here.”

“Just give me the keys, Frank. Please.”

“Why? Where are you going?”

“I can’t tell you. You have to trust me. Please give me the keys.”

Frank thought for a moment, then shook his head. “No. I’m not letting you go off so you can do something stupid.”

“Goddammit, Frank. You owe me.”

He stared at me for a moment and then threw the keys in my lap. “Try not to get yourself killed,”

he said and then walked away, back into the cabin.

Putting the keys in the ignition, I started the car and drove off, Frank’s final words still echoing in my mind.

I'll be fine, Frank.

I wasn't so sure if my soul would be though.

Chapter 24

I drove out in Josh's car to some farmland not far from the cabin where I knew I could find a crossroads. It was almost dawn when I got out of the car and walked to the middle of the crossroads. On every side of me there were flat fields, with grass to the left and tilled soil to the right. There were no buildings of any kind for miles.

I was completely alone out there in the cold silence of dawn.

Assembling what I needed for the spell, I brought the items to the middle of the crossroads and placed them on the dirt road. The last thing the spell required was for me to write down on a piece of paper my request and then burn the paper on top of the rest of the items, which I did.

Shivering in the cold, I waited.

The silence was oppressive as I stood in the middle of the road. Light broke through the inky sky and a slight wind picked up, causing me to pull my jacket closed and fold my arms across myself. As I waited, I had no idea if the summoning would even work and after a few more minutes, I feared the worst. Wringing my hands, I worried that I'd done the spell wrong and that I was back to being screwed again.

Then I heard a voice.

"Hello, Miss Leia Swanson."

I spun around with a start when I heard the voice behind me. Standing a few feet away was a man in a dark suit. He was tall and in the gloomy light I could just make out his shadowed face.

He had gaunt features and what looked like brown or gray eyes, I couldn't really tell. His hair was fair and swept back from his creaseless forehead. He had the air of a salesman about him. I stood looking at him for a moment, unsure of what to do or say next.

"Well, speak, little lady," the man said in a deep southern accent. "I'm here to serve. What can I do for you?"

"I need help," I said, unable to think of anything else.

The man walked closer to me. Everything about him was immaculate, from his hair to his skin to his clothes. He looked like he belonged in

downtown Mercy City with the rest of the suits. I had no doubt he spent a lot of time there, granting wishes in return for souls. “I gathered that,” he said in that silky southern accent, which was almost soothing to my ears. “I’m assuming this is your first time at the crossroads.”

“How does this work?”

“Straight to business, okay. Well, I help you with whatever you need and you give me what I need. It’s a simple exchange.”

“Okay.” I blinked rapidly at him, constantly moving wayward strands of hair out of my face.

“Now what would a pretty thing like you need from me? You look like you have everything you need.” He stopped to smell the air. “And a Nephilim as well. You’re not going to try and kill me, are you?” His eyes glowed a deep scarlet. “That wouldn’t go well for you. I would advise against that.”

“I’m not here for that.” I cleared my throat. “There’s something I need.”

“Shoot, tell me. I can’t wait to hear just *what* it is you need.” His smile unsettled me for some reason; I averted my gaze to the ground.

“I need a weapon that can kill the demon Abigor.”

The crossroads demon laughed. “Well, goddamn,” he said. “Ain’t that just the best one I think I’ve ever heard? And I’ve heard some good ones in my time.”

“I’m glad you find it amusing. Can you help me or not? If you can’t help me, I’m just going to go,” I said, making to walk away.

“Now hold on there, little lady,” the demon said. “Forgive me for laughing. It’s just what you ask is, to put it mildly, some heavy shit, if you get my meaning. Why in the hell would you want to try and kill yourself by trying to *kill* a demon like Abigor? How do you even know who Abigor is?”

“You obviously haven’t heard.” He looked at me as if to say go on. “Abigor has his sights set on destroying this world.”

“Abigor is a crazy, that’s for sure. I hear stuff about him all the time, mostly rumors down there.”

He pointed to the ground. “Last I heard he was trying to open the gates of Hell, although that was unsubstantiated. Are you telling me it’s true? He wants to unleash our little Hell on to this here earth?”

“It’s true. He told me himself.”

The crossroads demon looked surprised. “You’ve spoken with Abigor?”

“Yes.” I felt light-headed and overheated all of a sudden. I rubbed the back of my neck. “I spoke with him and he told me all about his grand plan. He’s an arrogant bastard.”

“Well, well.” The demon smiled to himself. “This is certainly an interesting development indeed.” He stood for a moment in deep thought, then laughed and said, to himself, “I can’t believe the old demon is going through with it.”

“Well, he is and I’m going to stop him.” I was pacing around the road, trying to contain my growing impatience. “I need a weapon that can kill him. Do you know of one?”

The crossroads demon stepped closer to me. “There may be a weapon. I may be able to help you get that weapon. But what makes you think you’ll be able to kill Abigor with it? No offense, but you don’t look capable of such a… massive feat.”

I hadn’t even considered the fact that Abigor might be difficult to kill, even with the right weapon. I was so focused on finding a suitable weapon that I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“Why don’t you let me worry about that? If you get me the weapon, I can kill him.”

He looked long and hard at me, as if trying to decide if I was worth helping or not. “Okay,” he said finally. “A soul is a soul after all. There’s a weapon that might be of use to you. Hardly anyone knows about it, but I’m not sure if it’ll do the job you’re talking about doing. I don’t see any other choice though.”

My heart was racing. If he was lying, I would kill him then and there with the knife strapped to my ankle. “What’s the weapon and where is it?”

“It’s the Demon Blade. It was made a long time ago by your very ancestors, the Nephilim. The sword was stashed away just before God decided to flood the earth. No one has seen it since.”

“So how do you know where it is? *Do* you even know?”

“Please. It’s my job to get people what they want, however hard that task may be. I know where the sword is. It’s actually a lot closer than you might think.”

“Are you saying it’s near here?

“It’s in the mountains not far from here, hidden inside a cave at the highest peak.”

“That’s convenient. Are you bullshitting me? Why would the sword be in such an obvious

place?”

The demon looked offended. “I don’t bullshit. And count yourself lucky the sword is even here at all.”

“How the hell am I supposed to get there?”

“You could climb, I suppose, though that might take a while. Or…”

“Or what?”

“Or I could take you there myself. You’ll have to get the sword yourself though. The Demon Blade can only be handled by a Nephilim of pure blood and *only* if the person is worthy to take it.” He smiled, amused. “That’s why it’s lodged in a boulder.”

I cocked my head and raised one eyebrow at him. “Really? Like Excalibur? Come on…”

He looked at me straight-faced. “Maybe you haven’t been listening. I said I don’t kid. I’m telling you the truth. What do you want me to say? Your ancestors had a flair for the dramatic.”

Something didn’t feel right to me. I mean what were the chances of the sword being so near?

Fuck it.

I didn’t have time to debate the serendipity of the situation. I would just have to take the crossroads demon at his word. “Let’s go then.”

“Not so fast. There’s still the matter of payment.”

Shit. I'd forgotten about that.

"You want my soul."

"For this, I want your soul and more besides."

"What? What more could I possibly give you?"

"You'd be surprised. I'll need to call in a favor at some point."

"You mean after you take my soul?"

"I'll not take your soul just yet. Not for a while. I give most people ten years before I do that.

You'll still need to sign a contract, though." Seemingly out of nowhere he produced a scroll of paper and let it unravel to the ground. It must have been three feet long, filled with tiny print.

"Are you kidding?"

"I like to make sure every eventuality is covered."

"No shit. Where do I sign?"

"Right here." He produced a feathered quill from thin air and pointed to a spot at the end of the scrolled contract. "In blood, of course."

"Of course." I produced my knife and made a small cut on my left palm before dipping the quill into the pooling blood in my hand.

Before I signed I asked him about this favor he mentioned. When would it be called in and what would it be?

"All in good time," he said smiling.

I shook my head, unable to shake the feeling that I was being screwed over. But again, what choice did I have? I signed the contract and he rolled it up, placing it inside his suit jacket. "Well, alright," he said, looking pleased that he had made a sale. "Let's hit those mountains, shall we?"

He took hold of my arm. "Oh, and I hope you have a flashlight."

An instant later I stood about two-thousand feet above sea level on a narrow ledge at the highest peak of the Black Mountain range that

surrounded one half of Mercy City. Behind me was the mouth of a cave and beside me was the crossroads demon who teleported us on to the mountain.

My head spun as I looked out at the vast vista before us, the morning sun shining its muted light over the city that sprawled out beyond the forest below. It was a beautiful and breathtaking scene and if circumstances were different, I would have taken the time to sit there on that ledge and take it all in, maybe do some sketches.

But the world as I knew it was about to end soon so sketching landscapes would have to wait for another time.

“All right,” the crossroads demon said. “In you go, I haven’t got all day.”

“So, it’s like that, is it?” I said. “You’ve made your sale and now you just want rid of me?

Typical salesman.”

The demon gave me a strained smile. “Try not to get lost in there.”

“I’m sure you’ll come find me if I do,” I said, turning to face the cave entrance.

“Don’t bet on it. Here.” He handed me a small flashlight. “Good luck.”

I looked into the darkness of the cave entrance and a sheen of sweat instantly broke out on my face. Just the thought of going into that dark hole made me feel like I was being bear- hugged by the Hulk.

Why do I have to be claustrophobic? Why couldn’t I just be afraid of spiders like other people?

I switched on the flashlight the crossroads demon gave me a moment ago. I didn’t even ask why he would have a flashlight on him. I assumed he just conjured it out of thin air the way he did with the contract I signed.

The tightness in my chest persisted as I took my first few tentative steps into the cave. The tunnel was barely as high as my head; I could just about stand up straight without bashing my head on the rock above me. The deeper I walked into the darkness, the more oppressive the air was, which only exacerbated my claustrophobia.

The rough walls narrowed the further in I walked. As I squeezed my way past a large boulder that partly blocked the way, I wondered how a person could have gotten up here in the first place to even hide the sword, unless they had teleported, which was likely the case.

Can Nephilim teleport, I wonder?

Only one way to find out. I shut my eyes and concentrated, willing myself to teleport wherever the Demon Blade was. A moment later I opened my eyes to find I was still in the same spot.

"Shit," I said. Obviously this Nephilim can't teleport. Looks like I'd have to continue the old fashioned way.

My anxiety levels rose as I moved deeper and deeper into the cave. My breathing was so shallow that I thought I was going to pass out. I had to hold on to the wall of the cave and take deep breaths as I thought, *I can do this, I can do this…*

I looked behind me and I could no longer see the light from the entrance. Panic gripped me tightly and I clung to the cave wall like I was about to fall through the floor to my death. I squeezed my eyes shut as it felt like the entire mountain was pressing down on top of me.

I can't do this, I can't do this…

In a fit of panic I stumbled back towards the entrance of the cave because I really believed the rock would collapse and I would end up buried in the mountain forever, no one knowing I was even there. My mind was telling me I had to get out before that happened. "I have to get out, I have to get out, I have to get out…" I kept repeating to myself and then for some reason I thought of Josh and I glimpsed his face in the darkness of the cave or my mind; I wasn't sure which. It reminded me of why I was there in the first place, of what I had to do if I wanted to save him.

Forcing myself to stop, I gulped air until I began to settle down. If I was going to get the sword I would have to get a grip on myself.

Just don't think about it… don't think about it and keep moving…

So I moved back into the cave once more, taking one step at a time, ignoring the strange creatures that I occasionally glimpsed crawling along the walls, creatures that had likely never seen daylight or a human being before, least of all one who was panic stricken and who

had never felt so small or insignificant or out of her comfort zone.

It was like the mountain itself was laughing at me as it beckoned me in further because it knew I would never make it out again. I would be trapped, I would die in there…

Control your thoughts… counter the negative…

I will not die inside this mountain… I will get the sword and make it back out again because I can do this, I can fucking do this…

"Alright… keep moving… just keep moving… don't think about it… doing this for Josh… for Josh…"

I stopped for a second to shine the light ahead of me. Was it just me or was the cave getting narrower? Great. As if it wasn't bad enough.

I forged on, sweat running down my face, wondering if the cave was really an entrance to Hell and I had been tricked by the crossroads demon…

Stopstopstop…

The cave was narrowing, but I kept moving, even though every step was agonizing and it felt like I was running out of air with every passing minute. I kept going, moving inch by inch for what seemed like an eternity until finally the narrow cave widened out and I stepped out into a large opening.

I took in gulps of air as I stood for a moment, glad to be out of the narrow entrance where I didn't have to crouch anymore.

And then I noticed the smell, like strong ammonia. It was overpowering and I covered my nose and mouth with my free hand.

What the hell is that God awful smell?

In the darkness I heard movement of some sort, like something was in the big open space along with me.

My breathing was shallow and my chest tightened to the point where I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Clutching at my chest, I tried to control my breathing and after a minute or two, I just about breathed normally again, although I couldn't help shivering in the cold atmosphere of the cave.

I shone the flashlight around the open space. It was big— there was

maybe twenty feet of space to the left of me, which I was glad to see as I didn't feel as confined anymore. The space also had a large pool of still water in the center, with huge lumps of rock surrounding it. I hoped nothing big lived in the pool, nothing that could crawl out and try to eat me.

Shining the light above me, I checked to see how high the ceiling of the cave was and when I did I couldn't help but gasp.

There were fluttering black shapes all over the roof of the cave.

Bats.

"Just fucking great," I whispered as I shone the light over the roof of the cave. "I'm in Bat City."

There must have been thousands of them hanging upside down from the rock.

I realized I was terrified.

What if they attacked me?

I would never get out of there alive. If the bats didn't kill me somehow, fear and panic surely would.

I stood still for a long time as I shone the flashlight up at the hanging bats, barely allowing myself to move for fear that I would disturb the colony. Occasionally one of the bats would fly to a different part of the roof and I would hold my breath just in case I drew attention to myself and the bat flew down to investigate.

What was I going to do?

As I shined the light around the rest of the cave I couldn't see any sign of a sword, nothing except rocks and a weird ratlike creature that was white and hairless scurrying across the cave floor to avoid the flashlight beam.

I wanted to curl up in a ball. I was frozen, unable to go back or forwards.

I was trapped.

Then I spotted a hole in the far wall, on the other side of the cave pool. Looking over at the hole it seemed scary and uninviting, like no one was supposed to enter it, but I knew I had to.

Something told me the sword was located wherever that tunnel in the rock led.

I knew what I had to do; now I just had to do it.

I shone the light up to the bats again, just to make sure they were still undisturbed, then I directed the beam in front of me and moved forward through the open space, the ammonia in the room making my eyes water.

The rock beneath my feet felt squishy. With disgust, I realized I was walking through bat shit.

Once I noticed this delightful detail, it was all I could do to keep trudging through the thick mass beneath my feet and I groaned aloud as I felt the stuff splash around my ankles and make its way into my boots. I could hear occasional splashing sounds as the bats continued to squirt their guano onto the cave floor and into the pool of still water.

I should have brought Frank with me, I thought. Then he could have done this and I could have waited safely and "unclaustrophically" at the crossroads where there were no bats and I didn't have to suffer walking through shit.

Too late. You're here now. Just keep moving. The sooner you find the sword the sooner you can get out of this hell hole.

Plowing through the bat shit, carefully climbing over boulders that were in my way, I finally made it to the small cave entrance, and when I got there, I wished I hadn't.

I shone the light into the hole in the wall and saw that it was even narrower than the other cave I had come through to get inside the mountain in the first place. The horrible feeling of being bear-hugged enveloped me again and tears of despair welled up in me, for all the good they would do.

To get through the cave, I would have to go down on hands and knees; the hole in the rock was too narrow to stand up in.

I knew the sword was on the other side. It was only that sense of certainty that allowed me to get down on my hands and knees and start crawling along the cold, damp rock of the cave, otherwise I would have left then and there, going back the way I came and forgetting about all of it. The world could go to Hell in a hand basket

for all I cared.

It hurt, crawling through that cave, the hard rock pressing against the bone of my elbows and kneecaps. Every movement was an ordeal. There was no air and I wheezed as I tried to breathe, my chest feeling like it was about to cave in. I heard the blood rushing in my ears and my head pounded, sweat dripping off me.

I kept crawling. I knew if I stopped, I wouldn't move again, that I would just lay there until the cave became my coffin.

The claustrophobia was unbearable when I was forced to lie flat on my stomach, the cave being too narrow to stand up in or even crouch in. There was barely a foot of space all around me. It felt like the entire mountain pressed down on me and it got harder to move with every agonizing inch that I took.

I didn't allow myself to think. Self preservation demanded that I concentrate on moving forward or else I was going to die. I couldn't even turn around, which left only one direction to go in.

Forward.

Keep moving forward.

I cried tears of relief when I came to the end of the cave and it opened out into another open space. I slithered out of the hole and took massive lungful's of air, even though it tasted stale. I felt like a newborn, having just emerged from a womb of hard rock.

Finally able to stand up again, I leaned on my legs for support, moving the flashlight around the room with my other hand. This opening wasn't as big as the previous one where the bats lived. In fact, it was about half the size as the other opening, and unlike the other one it was completely featureless, just smooth rock walls, floor and ceiling.

Except for a single large boulder in the center of the room.

I shone the torch over the boulder, my stomach muscles tensing as I prayed the sword I was looking for would show up in the light. I couldn't face going any further into the mountain, and besides that there didn't appear to be any other openings in the rock face.

The light flashed over the boulder and I didn't see anything that resembled a sword and my heart sank in my chest. I directed the light beam over the stone again, this time catching a glimpse of something,

not shiny metal as I had expected, but something dull that I could just about make out from where I stood.

That has to be it.

With clammy skin and an aching chest I walked towards the boulder, but then lurched forward as my foot fell into a dip in the rock. Losing my balance, I fell forward and crashed down onto the hard stone, dropping the flashlight in the process which immediately went out.

I lay motionless on the rock, entrenched in total darkness.

Panic gripped me tighter than a dying man hanging off a ledge and it felt like two huge hands had reached out from the darkness and grabbed me around the ribs to crush me. I couldn't breathe as I blinked into the pure blackness.

In the terrible darkness I was lost and as alone as I've ever been.

"No, no, no, no…" I groped around the cave floor, trying to locate the flashlight again, praying that if I actually managed to find it that it would still work.

There was no way I was getting out of that cave again without light; the idea was unthinkable. If I dwelled on that outcome I'd curl up in a tight ball on the stony floor of the cave and wait to die.

So I kept searching, despite the panic that crushed me like the weight of the mountain crushing layers in the rock. I ran my hands along the surface in desperate hope of locating the flashlight again, my only lifeline in the awful darkness.

And then I felt it, the familiar metal grip of the torch.

Yes!

I grabbed the flashlight and clutched it tightly to my chest harder than I'd ever held anything, taking deep breaths as I did so. Hard to believe something as innocuous as a flashlight could mean the difference between life and death.

I felt for the power button. Clicked it.

Nothing happened.

The darkness remained.

I clicked the button again.

Still nothing.

Low mewling noises escaped from my mouth that echoed around the lightless cave and the

hands that grabbed me earlier from the darkness squeezed me hard again.

“Please… come on…” I banged the flashlight on my arm, trying to get it to work, clicking the button on and off but nothing did any good.

Darkness persisted.

The hands around my ribs squeezed tighter.

Once more.

I shook the torch.

Clicked the button.

And there was light.

“Oh, thank God…” The hands that gripped me suddenly released and I sank down on my knees, tears running from my eyes as I threw my head back and released a long breath.

I had never felt such relief.

“Alright...” I illuminated the boulder a few feet away and walked over to it.

The sword was jammed in the rock.

It was embedded about half way into the boulder at a forty-five degree angle. The blade itself looked red in color. It didn’t appear to be metal unless the atmosphere of the cave had done something to it. The hilt of the sword was metal, though, with the grip wrapped in some sort of leather binding.

All I had to do was pull the sword out of the huge lump of rock.

My stomach tightened at the possibility that I might not be able to remove the sword from the stone. If that turned out to be the case, then the horrible experience I just put myself through, would be for

nothing.

I would have sold my soul for nothing.

And I didn't think the crossroads demon gave refunds.

I took a deep breath and placed the butt of the flashlight in my mouth. I gripped the handle of the sword with both hands and pulled as hard as I could.

The sword didn't budge.

Not a single inch.

This can't be happening.

I pulled at the sword again and it still wouldn't move.

"Fuck!"

On the third attempt I put my foot against the boulder for leverage as I pulled once more on the sword.

I almost went flying back as it came out of the stone with a loud grinding sound, but I kept my balance this time. One fall was enough.

I stood there in the cave with a sword in my hands and a flashlight in my mouth, staring at the blade in amazement, hardly able to believe that I even had it in my hands. Tears of joy and relief streamed down my face. I felt like a contestant on one of those extreme game shows having finally gotten the prize after much pain and humiliation.

Then I remembered where I was.

In a cave, inside a damned mountain with a colony of bats next door.

Time to go.

With sword in one hand and flashlight in the other, I walked back to the hole in the rock that I had emerged from what seemed like hours before. I didn't look forward to crawling back into that cave. From this end it seemed even narrower and just looking down it, made my mouth go dry and sweat to run down my stinging face.

Don't think about it. Just do it.

Bracing myself as best I could, I bent down and crawled into the cave,

keeping the flashlight in my mouth—which made it difficult to breathe—and the sword in my left hand. My right hand I used to pull myself along the rock as I slid deeper into the tunnel. The going was even tougher than the last time because I had to carry the sword. A ridiculous amount of sweat streamed down my face, making my eyes sting and my mouth taste salty. I breathed heavily, to the point where I thought I was in danger of using up all the air in the tunnel.

I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, then started moving again, so glad when the tunnel widened and I could start walking on my feet, albeit bent over. Pretty soon I reached the opening and the space with the bats in.

Making it into Bat City, I stood wiping sweat from my face, getting my breath back. The ammonia smell assailed my nostrils once more, causing my eyes to water and my stomach to turn, but I didn't care.

All I had to do now was cross the room without disturbing the bats too much and make my way back through the entrance tunnel and out to the ledge on the mountain side. It felt like a lot to do still, but I was motivated by wanting to get off there, plus it was a journey I had already done once, so it should have been easier second time around.

I walked across the room, the sword by my side giving me some comfort this time. At least if the bats did decide to go for me, I could use the sword to defend myself, although I wasn't sure if it would do much good against an entire colony of large bats when they decided to attack me all at once.

They did seem slightly noisier and animated above me this time, but I dared not dwell on what that could possibly mean. I just kept moving.

Do bats even attack people?

I didn't know and I hoped I would never have to find out as I treaded back through the sloppy shit that covered the cave floor, the ammonia smell overpowering as I churned up the guano with my boots. Every step I took echoed around the cave, amplified way too much for my liking, considering what was above me.

Once I made my way around the cave pool, I quickened my steps, not caring that the bat shit was splashing all over my legs and filling my boots.

I wanted out of that damned cave. I needed to see daylight again.

I had no idea up to that point that I would miss something as everyday and taken for granted as daylight. But I did. Terribly. I'd make a terrible a vampire, that's for sure.

Reaching the tunnel entrance, I wasted no time about stepping into it. The end was in sight and I couldn't wait to get there, so much so that I tripped and fell, the flashlight flying from my hands a second time, the sword clanging on the rock beside me. I yelled out in shock and pain when I hit the rock, having hit both my knees hard. My cry echoed through the tunnel and back into Bat City, where it continued to echo for what seemed like a long time. Too long.

The flashlight had stopped working again.

I was back in the full dark once more.

Then something flew past my head at great speed and I flinched.

No.

Something else whizzed past me in the darkness with a high-pitched screeching sound.

The bats had awoken and more and more of them flew past me in the darkness of the cave, their ear piercing squeals killing my ears to the point where I hunched my shoulders and scrunched my eyes closed.

I had to get out of there.

But I had no light to see.

Forget the fucking flashlight and just run!

I felt for the sword, grabbed it and ran forward in the darkness, feeling my way along the rock walls as a bat after bat flew past me, missing my face by just millimeters.

Then I felt one of them crash into my back and I yelped.

Another bat flew into the back of my head and I cried out again, this time in pain as I was knocked forward onto my knees.

More of the creepy as hell things flew into me, hitting me like bullets as the cave filled up with them. A storm of bats surrounded me, their furry bodies rubbing against my skin, their leathery wings flapping in my face, their claws scratching me.

I screamed like I was being murdered. All I could do was try to cover my head as I stumbled on through the cave, praying the exit wasn't too far away.

Then I saw it.

Light.

Just a few chinks of it up ahead.

That was all I needed to see.

Screaming with effort, I ran down the cave toward the light, toward the entrance where all the bats were shooting from. I kept running and screaming until I burst through the cave exit and into the light along with the storm of bats that surrounded me.

I ran too far.

My stomach heaved and adrenaline shot through me as I teetered on the ledge on the

mountainside, daylight blinding me. I fell forward into thin air and was sickened that things could end that way. That I should go through all that to come out the other side and fall off a goddamned cliff.

I braced myself for the inevitable impact on the ground below, but then I felt a grip on my arm and a second later firmness under my feet. When I dared to open my eyes, I saw that I was standing on the ground and that I was back at the crossroads like nothing had ever happened.

I fell to my knees on the dirt road and stayed there crying, never as grateful to be alive in my life.

I don't know how much time passed before I got a grip on myself, but I looked up to see the crossroads demon standing over me. Between the sun at his back and the tears in my eyes, I could hardly make him out. "Did you have to disturb the wildlife?" he said.

I wiped my face with my hands and stood up. "You could have told me there was bats in that damned cave," I said. I was still shaky as I looked up towards the top of the mountain. It was a long way up, but I could see the colony of bats circling around up there, just a cloud of black shapes in the sky now, nowhere near as threatening as they were up close. "I thought I was going to die in there. If I get rabies our

contract is null and void, you hear me?"

"Don't be silly, girl. You're a Nephilim, you won't contract rabies."

"I still could have died in there."

"Well, you didn't, and you managed to get the sword, I see." He looked eagerly at the Demon Blade. "May I see?"

I almost forgot I had the sword in my hand. I considered his request for a moment, reluctant to hand over my prize.

"I'm not going to take it from you. We had a deal, remember?"

I handed him the sword. He held it horizontally in both hands, his eyes running over it. "The blade is made from demon's blood, you know. It's from where the sword gets its power."

I nodded, understanding then why the blade was that dull crimson color. "And it will kill Abigor?"

"If you manage to get near him with it." The look on his face said he didn't hold out much hope of that happening.

I took the sword from him. "I'll get him, don't worry."

The demon's eyes flashed red for a second as he considered me. "Well, good luck then," he said.

"It looks like our business is concluded. You'll hear from me again at some point."

"When?"

"When I need you." With a smile he disappeared back to wherever he came from.

I walked to the car and put the sword in the trunk. Then I sat in the car and used my cell phone to call Frank. "We might just have a chance at killing Abigor," I said.

"What do you mean?" Frank said. "What have you done?"

"I'll explain when I get back. In the meantime, you need to call Eva and get to work on a location spell to find out where Abigor is."

"What? Why?"

“Because,” I said. “I’m going to kill the sonofabitch.”

Chapter 25

Frank and Eva were in the cabin when I got back. The two of them looked at me like I was some kind of creature that had just wandered in from the woods. I must have looked a sight as I stood there, grubby, sticky with sweat, covered in bat shit, scratches all over my face from the bat claws and a demon-killing sword in my hands.

“Remember when I said not to do anything stupid?” Frank said. “I take it you didn’t heed my advice.”

“What the hell happened?” Eva asked from the living room. She sat in one of the armchairs, a book in her hand. She put the book down and came over to examine me. “Where did you get all those scratches?”

“More to the point, what is that *smell*?” Frank asked, his face contorting. “Is that ammonia?”

“Guano,” I said, walking into the kitchen to get a glass of water, the sword still in my hand.

“Bat shit? What the hell have you been up to? And where did you get that sword?” He came over and took the sword from me, started to examine it. “What kind of blade is this?”

“It’s made from demon’s blood,” I said after knocking back two full glasses of water. I hadn’t realized nearly dying in a cave was such thirsty work.

Eva took the blade from Frank and tested its weight, giving it a few swings. “Perfectly balanced,” she said. “Is this supposed to kill Abigor?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay,” Frank said, folding his arms. “Where’d you get it? I can’t wait to hear.”

I quickly went over the whole scenario I’d gone through to get the sword. They both looked flabbergasted. Frank shook his head. “You sold your damned soul for a sword?”

“No, Frank, I sold my soul so we could kill Abigor and save my brother, along with the rest of the world. A small price to pay, don’t you think?”

Frank and Eva looked at each other. They knew they couldn't argue with me over what I'd done, simply because we didn't have any other options open to us.

"That was a very brave thing you did," Eva said.

"Thank you, Eva, but I just did what I had to do."

Frank still didn't seem convinced, but I knew he would come around, as he didn't have a choice.

"You should have told us what you were planning," he said. "You can't keep things from us like that. That's how people get killed."

I gave Frank a look that made it clear he had no right lecturing me on full disclosure and he looked away. "I need a shower," I said. "Are you two going to do the location spell or what?"

"I'll get started right away," Eva said, smiling at me like she was proud.

I started toward the bathroom so I could shower. Frank called after me as I did so. "Yeah?" I said, expecting another lecture.

"That was reckless what you did, but...you know, good job."

"Thanks." I gave him a smile before I shut the bathroom door behind me.

After I showered, I went to my room to get changed. I moved quickly, still hyped up from the cave experience, and just wanting to confront Abigor. Adrenaline shot through me every time I thought about the demon. I tried hard not to think about the consequences if I failed to stop him.

My own death would be the least of it. Humanity would be enslaved forever, trapped in Hell on earth and ruled over by a demon despot with a grudge. It was nuts to think that I could stop something so catastrophic, but if nearly dying in those caves had taught me anything, it was that I was stronger than I gave myself credit for. I just hoped I was strong enough.

When I changed into a pair of black leather pants, tight black top, black leather jacket and boots, I stared at my reflection in the mirror for a moment like it was the last time I'd ever see myself alive. I gave

my reflection a final dark look before I left the room and joined Frank and Eva outside in the car.

An hour or so later, all three of us sat in Frank's car outside a large warehouse in the Harbor District. It was just past dark and the docks were quiet, most of the activity was done for the day.

The warehouse was surrounded by shipping crates and it had two huge doors on the front. Light poured from the few windows that ran along the top of the building.

"Seems quiet from out here," Frank said, looking out the window. "We should find a side entrance. I doubt the front doors are open for us."

I sat in the back seat, the Demon Blade across my lap. "Let's go then," I said, impatient to go in.

"Hold on," Eva said from the front passenger seat. She was dressed in leather pants that were a bit looser fitting than mine, plus some kind of leather top that seemed to double as body armor. It was the first time I had seen her dressed for battle. She looked pretty badass and I was glad she was with us. "Shouldn't we do some recon first, see how many are in there?"

"We don't have time for that," I said. "Abigor could break the last seal at any time and then we'd be screwed. I think we should we just go straight in."

Eva and I looked at Frank who sat and thought for a moment. He nodded. "Alright, this is a suicide mission anyway," he said. "Come on."

We got out of the car and Frank and Eva went to the trunk to get their weapons. Frank strapped on an assault rifle, two handguns and the demon-killing knife. Eva had two shiny short swords, more like big knives, that looked to be made from a chrome-like substance. There were two sheaths attached to her leather body armor, one either side. She put the swords in the sheaths so that they hung at her sides. I couldn't help but smile. With her serious face and focused blue eyes, she looked as ready for battle as I'd seen anyone.

The Demon Blade was in my hand.

It was all I needed.

“Let’s move,” Frank said after he slammed the trunk closed.

We moved quickly towards the warehouse, looking around us as we did to make sure no one was around or hiding by the shipping containers. No one was. We moved up the side of the

warehouse until we came to a side door. “We go in here,” Frank said, his assault rifle at the ready. He checked the door and it was unlocked.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Eva said in a hushed voice. “It’s too quiet. Frank?”

Frank paused with his hand on the door handle. “It does seem kind of quiet,” he said.

“Come on, guys,” I said. “We don’t have time for this. We’re here, let’s get in there.” I acted braver than I felt. If my cave experience had taught me anything, it was that you had to swallow your fear and forge ahead anyway. The consequences of not acting were worse than actually trying to do something.

“Alright,” Frank said. “If we die in here I’m holding you responsible.”

“Yeah, whatever. Nothing you’re not used to anyway.” He shot me a look that I ignored and I gripped the Demon Blade tighter. “Open the door.”

The interior of the warehouse was cloaked mostly in darkness except for a few lights that shone from the office space on the top floor, which wasn’t really enough to illuminate the ground floor.

The sulfurous smell in the place was unpleasant to my nostrils, but damned better than the stench of bat shit.

The silence was ominous.

“Where the hell are they all?” Frank asked in a whisper.

“Just be careful,” Eva said her own voice a whisper in the silence.

We moved further into the warehouse and I soon became aware of a presence in the massive open space, though I wasn’t sure what kind of presence. I tingled all over from the Light Energy that ran through me and I wondered if the other two felt the same. Squinting into the near darkness, my hand gripped the Demon Blade so tightly my knuckles

whitened. Just as I moved towards the middle of the warehouse to affirm my suspicions of a presence, the lights came on all at once. We stopped dead in our tracks, our backs to each other as we stood ready, looking around, and expecting demons to come running out at us.

No demons came.

But there was someone else standing in the center of the warehouse, a tall figure in a long, dark overcoat, his head bowed as if in prayer. He stood in the middle of a magic circle that was obviously designed to keep him there. The three of us looked at the tall man in the circle, unsure of what was going on. Then Eva spoke. “An angel,” she said in a voice that conveyed an angel was the last thing she was expecting to see.

I frowned. “An angel?”

What the hell is an angel doing in here?

I walked towards the man in the circle and he lifted his head and looked straight at me. He appeared to be human, but after a second I caught a glimpse of his true form, a being of light with huge wings on his back. “My God…”

“Wait!” Frank said as he came beside me. “Don’t go any closer. Something’s up here.” He was looking around as if expecting Abigor and his demon soldiers to appear at any second.

The angel in the circle was silently staring in our direction. Despite Frank’s warning I took a few steps closer. “What are you doing here?” I asked it.

The angel didn’t answer, just kept staring at me, an intense look on his face. I stared back until I heard a voice to my far left. “He’s waiting for you,” the voice said and I snapped my head around to see Abigor standing there, along with Josh. “We’ve all been waiting for you.”

“Josh,” I said softly, resisting the urge to run to him. I knew there would be no point as he was too far gone, but it was still my brother stood there, demon or not. “What is this?” I said to Abigor.

The architect of Hell stood about ten feet away, Josh by his side. “This is the party I’ve set up for you. I think you’ll enjoy it.” He looked at Frank, who had his assault rifle trained on him. “You can lower that weapon. You won’t need it.” He stared at Frank, his eyes glowing a deep orange, until Frank slowly lowered the gun; he then turned his

attention back to me. “You’re probably wondering who our guest is.”

“He’s an angel,” I said, my hand gripping the Demon Blade. Every part of me wanted to run at Abigor right then, to run at him and lop his head off with the Demon Blade, but I resisted. I would wait until I knew what his game was first.

“That’s right, he’s an angel. His name is Nuriel. You may have heard of him. He’s quite famous amongst the folks upstairs.” He raised his eyebrows and motioned with his head towards the ceiling.

“So? What’s he doing here?”

Abigor and Josh looked at each other and smiled. That little act sickened me. It killed me to see my brother in league with such a monster. “I brought him here—well, trapped him here

actually—so you and he could break the last seal for me.”

I frowned, confused. Eva looked at me, the same confusion on her face as well. “What do you mean? That’s never going to happen.”

Abigor snorted. “I’m afraid it is, whether you want to or not.” He pointed to the sword in my hand. “I see you found the sword. Did you think you were coming here to kill me?” He laughed, amused at something. Josh laughed along with him and my face darkened at the sound. My grip on the sword got tighter.

“I *am* going to kill you, Abigor,” I said in a low voice that could have been a growl.

“I admire your spirit,” Abigor said, walking over to the angel in the circle. I took a few steps back and raised the sword. “Relax. I’m not going to fight you, Leia. I need you. Besides, that sword you have there is useless. It can’t kill me.”

What?

I tried not to look rattled. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” He looked at the angel. “Nuriel, am I lying?”

The angel didn’t look like he appreciated being Abigor’s puppet, but he answered anyway. “The Demon Blade only has power when wielded by a demon. In your hands, it is useless.”

“So you see,” Abigor said as he walked slowly around the outside of

the magic circle. “The sword won’t do you any good. It’s just another sword in *your* hands.”

I felt sick. The angel wasn’t lying, neither was Abigor. I looked at Josh, who was smiling smugly at me. I deflated.

“It’s a Demon Blade,” Abigor said. “You’d think the name would have given you a clue.

Humans, Nephilim—you’re all the same. So easily manipulated. I knew you would contact the crossroads demon after I mentioned trading your soul. The demon you signed the contract with, he was expecting you. He brought you to the cave where I put the sword for you to find. I knew you would come looking for me after that, and so here we are…”

I shook my head. It felt like the floor had dropped away beneath me and I was spiralling down out of control. “But why?”

Abigor laughed. “Because I could… because I enjoyed giving you the run around and because I needed time to capture myself an angel. They aren’t easy to catch, you know. Slippery things, angels.”

I looked at the angel Nuriel who stared at me with pity in his face, somehow affirming

everything Abigor was saying. “I’m *still* going to kill you.” I moved towards Abigor until I felt a hand on my arm. I turned to see Frank shaking his head at me. “Let me go!” Anger replaced the loss and despair and I let it consume me, to the point where I no longer cared if I lived or died.

“Let her come, Frank,” Abigor said. He was standing in front of the angel, his arms outstretched.

“Take your best shot, Leia. I won’t stop you.”

I wrenched my arm from Frank’s grip and walked towards Abigor who still stood with his arms out, waiting. I looked in his eyes and saw nothing but coldness mixed with deep amusement at the games he was playing. Raising the Demon Blade, I ran forward and put the blade right through his chest and out his back before pulling it out again. The demon grunted, fell back a couple of steps, but stayed on his feet. Dark blood seeped from the wound in his chest. He glanced down at the hole I left there and smiled. “Told you, didn’t I?” He started laughing.

I stepped back away from him, the blood -stained Demon Blade trailing along the floor as it hung in my hand. I shook my head, unable to believe that Abigor hadn't died when I stabbed him with the sword. He was supposed to die.

"Enough of this messing around," he said, the smile leaving his face. "You're going to do as I tell you now, Leia. You know why?" I didn't answer, just kept staring at him, back to feeling powerless. "Because if you don't, I'm going to kill your brother." He shot out an arm and squeezed his hand together like he was choking somebody.

I looked at Josh, who was standing with both hands clutching his own throat, gasping for air.

"Josh!"

"Don't!" Abigor commanded in a tone that resonated through me. His other hand was out as he telekinetically held me in place. I could no longer move a muscle. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to kill the angel, or I'm going to kill your brother, then I'm going to kill your friends as well, very slowly."

I could speak, but do nothing else as Abigor's power held me. "Why?"

"The last seal, of course. A pure blood Nephilim must kill an angel in cold blood. You're going to kill Nuriel here. *Now*." He released his grip on me and I nearly fell to my knees as I suddenly got control of my own body again all at once.

I looked back over at Josh who was now on his knees, gasping for air as he looked back at me with pleading eyes. I didn't see the demon in him anymore. All I saw was my brother who I loved more than anyone else in the world, the life slowly draining out of him. "Stop!" I shouted to Abigor. "You're killing him!"

"That's the point. Do as I ask and I'll stop. Otherwise, your brother dies along with everyone else here, including you."

I looked at the angel, Nuriel. That same look of pity was still on his face. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Do it. It's okay."

Eva appeared suddenly at my side. "You can't do this," she said urgently. "You kill that angel and the gates will be opened. We'll all be dead anyway."

She had a point. I wouldn't deny that. It wouldn't make any sense to

save Josh just so Abigor could enslave the entire world in a new Hell on earth. But I wasn't thinking logically; I was thinking about my brother, about how he was dying and how I needed to save him. I didn't care about the rest of the world in that moment, only my brother, the person I had gone through so much to try and save. I wasn't about to let Abigor take him away from me, and Abigor knew that. He knew I wouldn't say no.

I stepped up to the angel, Demon Blade in my hand. Frank and Eva were still behind me,

shouting for me to stop, to think about what I was doing, but I hardly heard them. All I heard was the life being squeezed out of my brother's body. I had to save him.

I raised the Demon Blade, ready to run it through the angel's chest.

"Not with that," Abigor said. He handed me a long silver dagger. "With this."

I took the dagger. It felt heavy in my hand, deadly. I still gripped the Demon Blade in my other hand. It was like I couldn't let it go after what I had been through to get it, as useless as it turned out to be. "I'm sorry," I said to Nuriel.

Nuriel looked at me with compassionate crystal blue eyes. "Do what you have to do," he said.

"Have faith."

I frowned at him a second, wondering what he meant by that last comment.

Faith? What did faith have do with anything?

I plunged the dagger into the angel's chest, holding it in there for a second before ripping it out again. Blinding white light poured from the angel's eyes and mouth before it suddenly exploded all at once in a huge ball of light that I had to turn away from, so blinding was it. When the light stopped there was nothing left of the angel except for a scorch mark in the center of the circle. I dropped the silver dagger on the floor and looked at Abigor. "Let my brother go."

"With pleasure," Abigor said, dropping his arm to his side again. I ran to Josh, despite the protests of Eva and Frank. Josh was up on one knee, breathing hard as he rubbed at his throat.

“Josh,” I said, kneeling down beside him. “Are you alright?”

Josh looked at me with black demon eyes and smiled. “I’m fine, Sis,” he said. “I don’t think you are, though.” He stood up, towering over me. “You’ve just been played.”

The realization of what I had done, of what I had allowed Abigor to do, hit me all at once like a sledgehammer to the chest. I could only remain there on my knees as I looked up at my brother through eyes that were now blurred with tears.

“Good job,” Abigor said to me after he came and stood by Josh. “Exactly as I had planned.” He put an arm around Josh the way a father would put a loving arm around his son. That ripped the guts out of me. “Well, time for us to go. See you all in Hell very soon.”

Then the two of them disappeared and I fell sideways onto the floor, crawling into a fetal position as I sobbed loudly. I wanted to die. If I still had the dagger in my hand, I would have stuck it in my chest. In the vast space of the warehouse, my cries echoing around it, I never felt so alone, so broken by anything, not even when I was stuck in that cave. When I felt hands on me, I screamed for them to leave me alone and the hands left me. I don’t know how long I lay there on the cold warehouse floor, sobbing like a child who had just lost her parents to some evil monster. All the while there was one terrible thought going through my mind.

It’s over… It’s all over.

Chapter 26

Frank drove to Eva's house first, where we dropped her off. From my position in the front passenger seat of the Chevrolet I barely nodded at her when she told me not to worry, that we would think of something else and I thought about telling her to wise up, that we were screwed and we had fucked up— *I* had fucked up—but I didn't because I couldn't bring myself to speak. I was ashamed. I allowed my own selfish feelings to override the greater good, allowed Abigor to play me so easily.

I broke the last seal.

Hell wasn't just coming.

It was here.

"It's over," I kept saying as Frank drove back to the cabin. "It's over… we lost… *I* lost it for us."

Frank drove in silence. I knew what he was thinking. It was written all over his face, it was clear from his every vibration—the stupid little girl let herself get played and now the world is going to end, all because she couldn't keep her emotions in check.

Loss engulfed me like a hurricane engulfing a small town, wrecking everything in its path. I had never felt so hollow.

When we got to the cabin, I didn't move from the car. Neither did Frank. It was like it felt pointless to do anything anymore, so we just sat, staring out the window at nothing. We stayed like that for a long time as if waiting for the end to come.

It was Frank who finally broke the silence.

"Well," he said. "We have two choices as I see it. We can sit here and wait for Hell on earth to arrive or we can go to that cemetery and fight."

I could see he was just trying to be optimistic in the face of despair. It was an optimism I didn't share. "To die you mean," I said.

"Better to die fighting. That's what I'm thinking."

I shook my head. “I can’t Frank. I just can’t. It’s over.”

“Goddamn it!” he slammed the steering wheel hard and I jumped. “Would you stop saying that?

You’ve shown yourself to be a fighter. Why stop now?”

I looked at him and laughed. “Because it’s fucking *over*, Frank!” I shouted. “Don’t you get that?”

“Yes, I get that!” he shouted back. “Of course I fucking get it. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to make it easy for that sonofabitch Abigor. If I’m going out, I’m going out fighting. I can’t just sit here and wait for some demon to grab me.”

Some demon.

Demon.

I looked at him.

“What?” he said.

I sat up straight for the first time since we’d left the warehouse. “Abigor said only a demon could bring out the power of the sword. So did the angel.”

“Yeah, so?”

“We still have that demon blood, don’t we?”

“Yeah… Wait… I know what you’re thinking….” Frank said as he caught on.

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking. We just might be able to stop Abigor after all.”

“Normally, I’d say you were crazy, but under the circumstances…”

“It’s the only option we have,” I concluded.

We got out of the car and ran to the cabin. Once inside we went to the cellar where the bucket of blood we siphoned from Morgana still sat on the floor. “Get me a glass,” I said to Frank.

When he arrived back a moment later with a tall glass I dipped it into the bucket of demon blood.

The blood was dark and thick, almost treacly where it had congealed over the last few days.

I looked at Frank and he nodded for me to drink.

Putting the glass to my lips, I drank. It tasted foul, like a spoiled meat smoothie, only much worse. I wretched and gagged after the first mouthful, and spat blood onto the floor. “Oh my God… that’s… indescribably awful.”

Frank’s face contorted as he watched me try again. I took another mouthful of the blood and quickly swallowed. I gagged again, but I somehow managed to keep the vile liquid down. I repeated the process, drinking and gagging until I drank the whole glass. I closed my eyes for a few moments while I allowed the blood to settle in my stomach. My body protested. The angel DNA in me tried to resist, tried to reject the liquid evil that I was putting in my system, but I fought and kept the blood down.

“How much are you going to drink?” Frank asked, filling the glass up again.

“As much as I can stand.” The second glass was harder to drink since I already knew what to expect. It took me half a dozen attempts to empty it. The blood felt heavy in my stomach, like lead, but I kept it down. “One more,” I said and Frank refilled the glass. I tipped my head and drank and after two mouthfuls I had to stop as my stomach heaved and I vomited on to the floor.

At least half a glass of demon’s blood spewed from my mouth and splattered all over the concrete. Frank jumped back to avoid the crimson splashes.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

“No! Let me finish.” Tears streamed from my eyes with all the retching and vomiting but I kept drinking until I finally finished the third glass. “Oh, Jesus… oh, God this is horrible.”

Something was happening inside me.

Frank had a hand on my shoulder. “What is it?”

“It’s… it’s like the blood is alive in my stomach… oh God… it feels like it’s crawling through my system.” I fell down to my knees.

“Leia!” Frank kneeled down with me. “You alright?”

“I don’t…” My whole body felt like it was on fire, like I had just drunk acid and it was burning its way through me. It was excruciatingly painful and I fell back onto the floor, convulsing and screaming with the pain. Blood erupted out of my mouth and I coughed, spraying red into the air and over Frank.

“Leia!”

The convulsions carried on for a few more minutes before they finally stopped and the burning sensation died down. One final convulsion forced me to arch my back off the floor for several seconds before my whole body just as suddenly relaxed again and I flopped back to the floor.

When I opened my eyes things looked different.

There was an orange tint to everything and when I looked up at Frank he seemed to have a yellowish aura around him. He flinched when I looked at him. “Your eyes,” he said. “They’re black.”

It worked.

I got up off the floor and stood for a moment while I tried to reconcile with myself what I had become. I could still feel the Nephilim power inside of me, but it felt much stronger now, more potent.

I had never felt such power and strength coursing through me.

My mind, which normally had a thousand thoughts running through it all at once, felt almost empty. I thought about nothing. My instincts ran the show now.

When Frank went to put a hand on my shoulder I gripped his wrist and grabbed him by the throat with my other hand, driving him back into the wall and lifting him off his feet. He pressed down on my arm, trying to say my name but unable to breathe properly.

When I looked into his eyes all I saw was a meat suit, not a person, just something to be used and abused as I saw fit. There was no emotion in me, only cold and calculated instinct, like a great white shark going after its prey.

I squeezed harder on Frank’s throat and watched calmly as his face turned purple. I only let him go when I felt something splashing on me

and then a horrible burning sensation on my face and neck. I staggered back, my hands clamping my face as I cried out in pain. “What did you do?” I screeched at him.

Frank slumped against the wall, holding his throat, trying to get his breath back. “Leia, you have to… you have to control it… Leia… please!”

The sound of Frank’s pleading voice touched something deep within me, something that was buried beneath the demonic power that coursed through me.

Emotion.

Conscience.

I felt faint traces of both in me somewhere, but they were overwhelmed by the terrible power that had a grip on me.

“Get control, Leia!” Frank said. “Please. We can’t do this unless you get control.”

Frank’s voice somehow touched my buried emotions, just enough for me to realize who he was to me. As I looked at him I no longer saw him as a piece of meat, but as a person, as my uncle. I felt the black power inside of me trying to beat down those feelings. Two different forces vied for control within me.

“You’re in control, Leia,” Frank said, his voice calmer and more measured now that he’d gotten his breath back. “You control the power inside you, not the other way around. Find the strength.

Remember what we have to do. Think about saving Josh.”

At the mention of Josh’s name my vision cleared and I saw Frank relax a little. “Your eyes are back to normal,” he said.

I stood, blinking at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was doing.” I felt like myself again, but the demonic power was still there, just below the surface, waiting for me to give in to it again, to yield to its awesome strength. I had to maintain control and I knew it would be a constant battle.

It was only the Nephilim power that gave me the strength to counter the demon influence.

“It’s okay,” Frank said. “I’m fine. Lucky I had holy water on me.” He held up his hip flask.

“That’s what burned me? That hurt.”

“Now you know why it’s so effective.”

“Don’t do that again.”

“Don’t try to kill me again then.”

“I won’t.”

“Come on. We gotta go. *Now*.”

We made our way quickly upstairs and then out to the car. When I looked down the mountain, to the city below, I stopped. “Frank,” I said, but Frank had already seen because he had stopped to look as well. There was a mass of black swirling clouds forming over the city, an omen that something terrible was about to come.

The demon power in me almost rose to the surface again as I took in the swirling black and gray clouds.

It recognized what was happening and it wanted a front row seat.

“Leia, let’s go.” Frank was already in the car, the engine started. I willed the demon power in me to back down and ran to the car, praying we weren’t too late to stop Abigor .

Chapter 27

Even though it was daytime, the whole city was shrouded in darkness. People were out on the streets looking up at the coal black sky, fearful and wondering what was going on. Traffic on the roads had slowed to a standstill, which made it difficult for us to drive the car to the cemetery where we knew Abigor and his minions would be. Frank was forced to mount the car on the pavement a few times, frantically sounding the horn to get pedestrians to move out of the way, a couple of times almost hitting people as we sped along the sidewalks in the Chevrolet, wrecking shop signs and whatever else stood in our way. Frank didn't care. He drove like he too had demonic power in him. Our only objective was to get to that cemetery and stop Abigor. Frank had already called Eva and told her to meet us there.

About half a mile from the graveyard, we stopped the car and bailed out. Traffic had come to a complete standstill as people just abandoned their cars so they could get out and see what was happening above them. As Frank and I got out of the car, the dark maelstrom above us began to thunder. Forked lighting projected down from the sky, hitting cars and people all over the place.

The entire city was in a panic, people running wildly everywhere. It was a scene from a disaster movie.

"This is chaos!" Frank said as we opened the trunk to get our weapons. I immediately grabbed the Demon Blade, which felt different in my hand, heavier, more powerful. *Alive*. "Let's go!"

Frank grabbed his own sword from the trunk. We ran as fast as we could through the crowds of people, knocking them out of our way as we raced through the streets towards the cemetery.

After five minutes, we made it to the open cemetery gates. The darkness seemed to be greater there than anywhere else, as did the winds and the sounds of crashing thunder. We couldn't hear ourselves speak as we stood in the midst of the maelstrom.

"Okay," said Frank as we ran through the gates and into the cemetery. "Kill whatever comes near us. I don't care who or what they are. We can't afford mercy."

He didn't have to tell me that; I already knew the stakes. Despite the fact that Abigor's minions would be mostly his private army of

Nephilim demons, we still had to kill them if they tried to kill us. It was collateral damage.

“And, Leia?” The strong winds were blowing Frank’s hair wildly, forcing him to half close his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Kill that sonofabitch Abigor. End this, you hear me? End it!”

I nodded as Eva came running through the cemetery gates. She was dressed in her leather battle gear as she wielded her twin blades, one in each hand. “This is some party,” she said, her dark hair blowing around her face.

“Best ever,” Frank said and they smiled at each other like it was the last time they would ever fight together.

“Hate to break up your little moment,” I said. “But are we ready?”

“No,” Frank said. “But let’s go anyway.”

We advanced forward into the cemetery as the first of Abigor’s soldiers came running at us, just kids with their master’s demon blood in them, having no choice in what they were doing, but neither did we have a choice.

We cut them down with our swords.

The Demon Blade, glowing bright crimson, felt attached to my hand, like it was a part of me. It made quick work of whatever demon came near me. With one swipe of the blade I was able to cut limbs off, decapitate bodies and in one case cut one of my attackers clean in half with one blow. The brutality of my actions, the carnage I left behind, would once have been unthinkable to me. Not anymore.

The demon power in me reacted to the bloodlust and violence.

It wanted to seize control and I let it.

My vision changed and I felt the awesome power within me grow.

I felt unstoppable as I forged on through the dark cemetery, slashing and hacking my way through Abigor’s minions like they were nothing, like I was swatting flies. At one point I sensed Frank beside me and I almost swiped my sword at him like he was just another demon to cut down. Luckily, one of the Nephilim demons got in the way and took

the blow, his head falling off his shoulders. When I looked again Frank had gone. I didn't know where and I didn't care.

My only instinct was to find Abigor and kill him.

After fighting my way through yet more Nephilim demons I finally found Abigor near the back of the cemetery.

He stood in front of what looked like a hole in the ground with two iron gates on either side. A fierce orange light came from within the hole, cutting through the darkness like a laser.

Abigor stood with his arms spread out as he spoke some sort of incantation to open the Hell Gate. He must have sensed me not far away since he stopped chanting and turned around to look at me.

His face dropped when he saw me with black demon eyes and the now glowing Demon Blade in my hand. The blade shone brighter the closer I got to him. Fear tried to rise up in me at the thoughts of fighting the ancient demon, but the power and energy in me left room for nothing else, certainly not fear.

Abigor glowered at me for a second, his eyes burning before he looked towards a tombstone to his left. I followed his gaze and saw Josh emerge from behind the tombstone, sword in hand, his eyes demon black.

My vision changed to normal for a moment, his presence stirring some latent emotion in me.

"Josh!" I called, but he merely looked at me like I was his enemy and nothing more, someone he had to kill.

"Kill her!" Abigor commanded. Josh started running towards me, his sword raised. I didn't move for a second as my brother advanced on me. I was frozen. It was only when I heard Frank shout from somewhere that I snapped out of it and raised my sword just in time to deflect the blow that Josh levelled without mercy at my skull.

I couldn't help but feel shocked by his viciousness as he raised his sword again and rained down another blow towards my head that I barely managed to block with the Demon Blade. "Josh!

Please don't. I don't want to fight you."

"Then you're fucked, Sis, because I'm going to kill you!" He rushed at

me again, his sword raised, ready to cut me down.

I sidestepped when he got near me and sliced the Demon Blade across his stomach. He howled in pain as he fell to one knee and looked at me with an ugly mixture of rage and cold murderous intent. I barely recognized him as my brother, so far gone was he.

“Stay down, Josh! Please don’t do this!”

He got up and came at me again. The steel of his sword flashed in front of me as he swung it at me in every direction, trying to get through. I blocked, dodged and parried all his swings, but the last one I redirected and his sword came down on my left leg, slashing into my thigh. I cried out in pain as I fell down on one knee.

“You can’t beat me,” he said, smiling as he walked back and forth in front of me, swinging his sword.

“I don’t want to beat you, Josh.” I looked over at Abigor who was busy chanting the incantation to open the Hell Gate. I didn’t have much time.

Josh tried to take advantage of my diverted attention. I looked just in time as he came in with his sword raised high. Instinctively, I swivelled around and thrust the Demon Blade out. It pierced his side and went right through, cutting through his ribs on the other side.

I looked on in horror for an elongated moment as my brother just stood there, having dropped his sword to the ground. His face registered a look of surprise, like he thought he would never die.

“Oh God,” I said, my voice breaking as I pulled the Demon Blade out of him. He staggered and then fell to the ground, holding his side.

I scrambled over to where he lay holding his stomach as blood pumped from the wound in his side. “Josh, Josh…” His eyes had returned to normal as he looked up at me.

He smiled that warm smile that I knew from before he became a demon. “Leia,” he said. “I’m sorry. I…”

“Don’t speak…” I cradled him in my arms as his eyes kept rolling back into their sockets, changing from black to brown and back again before finally staying their normal color.

“You saved me…” Blood ran from his mouth.

“No, Josh, I didn’t, I didn’t…”

He managed a weak smile. “You have to save Mom…” His eyes closed and I slapped his face.

His eyes flew open again. “I didn’t want… to hurt you… couldn’t help it… I’m sorry…”

“I know,” I said and I wanted to tell him it was alright, that I knew it wasn’t his fault, that none of this was his fault, but it was too late. His eyes closed a final time and he went limp in my arms, his head falling to one side as the life finally drained from him.

That was it. He was gone.

The very person I was supposed to save, died in my arms. By my hands.

I let out a scream that echoed through the whole cemetery.

I would have sat there, cradling my dead brother in my arms, if I hadn’t have heard Abigor’s voice from behind me.

He sounded like he was still reciting the incantation.

Whatever emotions were in me, I fought them back and allowed the demonic power to take over.

My vision changed to demon mode as I stood up. I grabbed the Demon Blade again, which

instantly glowed bright crimson and seemed to meld itself to my hand.

“Abigor!” I shouted in a voice an octave lower than normal.

The demon stopped reciting the incantation and looked around. “You’re too late,” he said. “It’s done. The gate is open.” He raised his arms aloft like a demonic priest. “Hell is here!”

All around him demon spirits flew out of the piercing orange light and dispersed in every direction. Burning lava flowed from the hole, pooling out on to the ground, melting everything in its path.

Abigor laughed as the lava formed around his feet. He looked up at me, fixing me with his burning eyes. His body seemed to shift and I realized he was transforming into his true demon form. I stood back and watched as he grew in height to nearly seven-feet tall, three thick

horns curving back over his head, making him seem even taller. Spurs of bone jutted out of his shoulders and elbows, and his hands formed into great claws. His skin became something like horse hide, taking on a muddy gray color, and large pointed teeth filled his mouth. Standing there, surrounded by burning lava, he looked fierce and unstoppable.

My hand gripped the Demon Blade tighter. I feared I wouldn't be able stop the monster he had become.

"I didn't think you'd do it," he said, his voice guttural, monstrous. "Not only kill your own brother, but demonize yourself. You constantly surprise me. It's not too late. Join me. Rule with me. It's over now. There's nothing you can do. Hell is already here!" He raised his arms as multiple streams of different colored-smoke—demon spirits—flew past, swirling around him before making off into the black sky.

"Never!" I ran towards him, the Demon Blade raised and ready to strike him down.

Abigor charged towards me at the same time, one massive arm raised and ready to strike as he ran out of the lava and onto the grass to meet me. I swung the Demon Blade as hard as I could towards his sinewy body and ducked under his arm. I could hear his thick skin tear as the blade sliced into him. He roared with pain and rage and we turned to face each other again.

"You think you can kill me?" he roared, black blood seeping from the wound I had inflicted on him. "No one can kill me!"

We'll see about that.

Abigor charged again, swiping at me with his enormous clawed hands. I did my best to avoid his blows, but one of them caught me on the side of the head, knocking me off my feet and sending me flying through the air before crashing into a tombstone. The Demon Blade flew from my hand landing a few feet away from me. Before I could recover I felt a huge hand encircle my neck and Abigor picked me up and held me in front of his monstrous face, his hellish orange eyes blazing into me.

"Stupid girl," he said. "I could have given you power, status. Now you'll writhe in torment forever like every other pathetic soul in this world."

I spat in his face. "Fuck you!"

The demon roared, his putrid breath gusting into my face. He held me at arm's length and punched me in the chest, a blow that surely cracked my sternum in multiple places. Blood sprayed from my mouth as he hit me again in the stomach, cracking my ribs, bursting my insides.

When he threw me to the ground and stomped on me with a massive foot, I heard more bones break and every ounce of air I had was forced out my mouth along with a geyser of blood. "Fuck *you*!" he roared in my face and then laughed. "You lose, you little bitch!"

I was barely conscious as he walked away from me. My insides were like mush and every bone in my upper body was shattered along with my spirit and will to go on.

It was over.

I'd lost.

Chapter 28

I was broken and beaten beyond repair and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. Josh was gone. I had killed my own brother. Frank and Eva were probably dead as well. There was no one left.

Sorry, Mom, but I failed. Not quite the daughter you were expecting, huh? Not the kick ass chip off the old block that was going to save the world…

I don't know why I kept thinking about my mother, about how I'd let her down somehow. She had let me down in the worst of ways after all— yet the sense of failure, of shame, was stronger even than the crushing guilt I felt at killing Josh.

I closed my eyes and prepared to die.

But then something happened.

Something inside of me told me to open my eyes and when I did I saw Josh, but not just Josh, my mother and father as well. The three of them stood looking down at me, smiling like

everything was going to be alright. I stared back at my family and wondered why they weren't angry at me. "Get up, Leia," my father was saying gently. "Get up."

Was I hallucinating this?

Was I dead already?

I didn't know. I just knew my family was there with me, telling me to get up.

So I tried, but my injuries were too severe. I couldn't move. I tried again and still couldn't do it.

My mother's voice this time, stern and forceful. "Get up, Leia!"

On hearing her voice, a well of emotion opened up in me and with it, the Nephilim and demonic powers began to build up, spreading throughout my body—healing me—but not just that, not just healing me, *transforming* me …

I sat up.

The power in me got stronger by the second. A new form of energy, one I had never felt

before—one consisting of Nephilim and demonic power mixed with raw human emotion—began

to spread, coursing through every fiber of my being.

I got to my knees and the energy in me quickened.

Everything started happening very fast.

My insides contorted, my bones twisted and lengthened, my organs shifted to accommodate the changes that came over me.

I cried out when two wings burst from my back, and then again when horns shot out of my skull, the sound of grinding and cracking bone in my ears as the horns grew in length.

What is happening to me?

What am I becoming?

I stood up and my body grew taller. I looked down at myself and saw that my skin had turned leathery and a light blue color. My hands turned to claws. I held them up in front of my face, inspecting the huge talons like they belonged to someone else.

What was I? A demon?

One thing was for sure. I was no longer me. I was no longer Leia Swanson. I was something else entirely. Leia was still in there somewhere, hidden deep within my new demon form, but she wasn't in control.

The demon was.

I flung my arms out to the sides and roared into the blackened sky like a creature that had just emerged into the world for the first time. The wings on my back shot out, extending six feet either side of me and I rose from the ground with their effortless motions.

I was Demon Leia from that point on.

Demon Leia hovered ten feet in the air. It roared the name of Abigor, who stood facing the mouth of Hell, welcoming the demon spirits who flew out of it. The demon turned around to look at me and his face

seemed astounded, like he was witnessing some kind of demonic miracle.

The demon in me roared again and flew towards Abigor with shocking speed. It swiped his head with strong talons as it flew past him before stopping in midair to look down on Hell's architect, who roared back, black blood running down over his face.

Demon Leia continued to hover as Abigor ran forward and leaped into the air, one massive hand held back and ready to strike.

The demon who had taken over me remained calm. I don't think it knew fear.

As Abigor launched himself into the air Demon Leia shot to the side and met him with a kick to the face that sent Abigor flying back to the ground. He landed with a *thump* on his back.

Demon Leia waited patiently, flapping huge wings to stay in the air. Just as Abigor got to his feet again, Demon Leia swooped in and clamped its massive hands over Abigor's head, sinking

talons into flesh. Abigor roared as Demon Leia flew upwards, taking him with it.

Abigor struggled, but there was nothing he could do. Demon Leia flew high into the churning sky, lightning forking around it as it hovered so it could throw blow after blow into Abigor's head, relentless in its violence, only wanting to destroy the demon it held by the head with one hand.

Abigor tried to fight back, but he could hardly reach Demon Leia and he became ever more weakened by the blows he took. Demon Leia grabbed Abigor with both hands, turned him

sideways, and flew down towards the ground, hurtling at great speed until it impaled Abigor on an iron cross below. Abigor roared as the cross went through his back and out his chest. He was stuck like a pig on a skewer, unable to move, but not dead.

Demon Leia flew over and picked up the Demon Blade I had dropped earlier. When it had the blade, it flew back and landed on the ground beside Abigor, who was still trying in vain to pull himself up off the cross that impaled him. Demon Leia watched him for a moment, savoring the victory.

“I said there was great power in you,” Abigor said, blood splattering from his mouth. He was talking to me, not the demon, but neither of us cared. Demon Leia raised the sword and brought it down on Abigor’s neck, slicing his huge head off, which rolled away into the nearby lava, the orange eyes still glowing fiercely.

But the gates of Hell were still open and Hell was spilling out onto the earth.

Chapter 29

I knew the words that would close the gate; I made sure I memorized them when I read them in the book back at Frank's cabin. So had Frank, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Worse than that, my inner demon was in full control and it was just standing there staring at Abigor's lifeless body. I was powerless to do anything when it lifted Abigor's body from the iron cross and carried it over to the mouth of Hell. Demon Leia lifted the body above its head and threw it into the hole where it disappeared into the blazing orange light.

The demon then retrieved Abigor's head before walking back over to the Hell entrance. I experienced the demon holding Abigor's head aloft and say in a voice I didn't recognize at all, "I won," before tossing the disembodied head into the pits of Hell. It stood there after that, lava swirling around its feet while it laughed maniacally, revelling in its victory.

Deep down inside the demon, I tried to wrestle back some sort of control so I could at least get it to speak the words that would close the gates.

But I didn't know how.

Through the ecstatic feelings of victory the demon experienced, my mom's face flashed in its mind somewhere and it stopped laughing. Whatever part of me was left tapped into the emotions that accompanied the image of my mom, which seemed to work because the image got brighter. I remembered my mom's voice when she told me to get up, until finally I felt some semblance of control return as I willed the demon to say the words.

"Abinsidi is diabolic, liberalness, Domine…" it growled.

It worked.

It just had to say the rest.

I forced my presence into the demon to gain more control until I made it speak again. "Ut Ecclesiam tuam secura tibifacias libertate servire…"

That was it. Just a few more words left to say and the gates would be closed.

From deep within the demon I willed myself to take control until finally I forced it to say the remaining words. “Terogamus, audi nos.”

Through the demon’s eyes, I saw the blazing amber light that emitted from the hole in the ground lessen with each passing second before it disappeared altogether into the darkness. The iron gates shut back over the hole with a clang.

It was done.

Demon Leia stood looking around the cemetery at the aftermath. The sky above was still in turmoil, but it was starting to clear, the maelstrom of dark clouds dispersing into the atmosphere.

On the ground, things wouldn’t be clearing so quickly. A shocking number of dead bodies were scattered all over the place, slumped against tombstones, splayed out on the ground, staining the grass red with blood.

The demon in me was emotionless as it took in the scenes of carnage. Even though Hell had come for just a short while, it had left its mark. Through the eyes of the demon I counted at least thirty bodies, all of them once demonized Nephilim kids. I dreaded to think what carnage had ensued outside the cemetery. A host of demons had escaped when the Hell Gate had been opened and they were still out there somewhere. But that wasn’t my concern. Josh was.

His body lay prone on the grass where I had killed him. A surge of emotion welled up in me that rocked even the demon in control. It gave a low growl of despair and then walked over to Josh’s body and stood looking down at him. His black T-shirt was ripped and sodden with blood from where my sword went in. His eyes were closed, his head tilting limply to the side.

I wanted to scream at the fact that I had killed my own brother, but the demon had other ideas.

While the human part of me writhed around in pain and loss, Demon Leia knelt down and lightly took Josh’s head in its huge clawed hands, almost completely covering it.

What the hell is it doing?

Baffled, I could only look on as the demon continued to hold Josh's head up while it seemed to whisper something in some ancient sounding language that I had never even heard before. A moment later I gasped inside the demon as a greenish light began to glow from its hands and around Josh's head. Some sort of energy flowed through the demon, a different kind of energy than the type I had felt before. This was not destructive energy; this was the energy of creation, the immortal energy of life itself that the demon was somehow able to channel.

Josh opened his eyes as soon as the demon took its hands away from his head.

The demon stood back as my brother blinked a few times and then sat up on the grass. His brown eyes widened when he saw the huge demon standing before him. I wanted to say it was me, his sister, but the demon wouldn't speak.

Fear and confusion flashed across Josh's face as he scrambled back away from me, from the demon. I had to return myself to normal. Demon Leia had served her purpose. It was time for Nephilim Leia to make an appearance again.

The demon seemed to sense my desire for normality. A few seconds after the thought crossed my mind the changes began, the same weird process as when I first transformed, but in reverse. The large wings on my back folded in and somehow retracted into my back again. The horns on my head slide back in, my whole bone structure shifting as I was reduced to my normal height again.

My claws retracted, my pointed teeth pulled back into my gums. The whole process only took a minute or so and then I was me again.

"Leia?" Josh looked at me in amazement. "Is that you?"

I smiled at my brother. "It's me."

"You're naked."

"Oh yeah." That fact had escaped me. Not that I cared at that point. It seemed a bit ludicrous to feel embarrassed given everything that just happened, and it wasn't like it was the first time my brother had seen me naked anyway. Still, I went to one of the dead bodies lying nearby, a young Nephilim girl with a missing left arm who had obviously bled to death. I silently apologized as I removed a T-shirt and pair of jeans

from the girl's corpse, as well as her boots. I put the clothes on and went back to Josh.

Josh was on his feet, checking himself over. The wound I had inflicted on him with the Demon Blade was gone. "How is this possible? I remember you killing me."

"You remember that, huh?" My face flushed.

"You didn't have a choice. I was trying to kill you." Tears formed in his eyes then. "I'm sorry."

Tears fell from my eyes as well as I ran and threw my arms around him, a moment I had been waiting for since the day he disappeared. He hugged me back, his strong arms wrapping around me. "I can't believe you're alive," I said.

He hugged me tighter. "Neither can I."

We held each other for a long time, a huge smile on my face despite the tears. I had done it. I had saved my brother. There was plenty of time later to reflect on the messed up way I had actually done it. I was just glad we were both alive.

Just then Frank and Eva came walking over the crest of a hill looking like two battle weary war veterans, a bit worse for wear and bloodied up but otherwise okay. I smiled, glad the two of them were still alive. "Hate to break this party up," Frank said. "But we should get going. Every cop in the city is going to descend on this place and I don't be around when they do."

There were dead bodies everywhere. How would we explain our presence here when the rest of the city was giving the cemetery a wide berth?

I let go of Josh and Eva came to focus her intense gaze on me. "I won't ask how you managed to turn into a demon," she said. "Are you alright?"

"You saw that, huh?"

"I think the whole city saw," Frank said. "Two demons fighting a hundred feet in the air… kinda hard to miss."

I saw Josh looking at Frank. "By the way," I said. "Josh, this is Frank. Our uncle."

Frank regarded Josh with some wariness. I didn't blame him. They both shook hands anyway.

"Thanks for looking after my sister," Josh said. "And sorry for like, being a demon dick and all. I couldn't help it."

"Yeah, I know," Frank said. "Buy me a drink, we'll call it even."

In the distance I heard sirens. "We have to go," I said.

After I retrieved the Demon Blade (it was too powerful just to leave behind), the four of us made our way through the cemetery, looking sadly at the bodies of the Nephilim kids scattered all around. Josh especially seemed particularly affected. He had been with these kids, helped train them. He was one of them. I realized then that it would take a long time for Josh to come to terms with what happened to him, if he ever did. If *I* ever did. Though I knew it wasn't over for me yet. I had more to do. I doubted it would ever be over me. I was in too deep and there was still the small matter of having traded my soul. Who knew how that would play out?

That all seemed far away though in that moment. The only thing I cared about was being with my brother, and with Frank and Eva. For better or worse, they were my family, the first real family I'd had in eleven years.

I smiled, feeling good about myself for the first time since the whole mess started. "First round's on me," I said.

Chapter 30

Two days later and I was sat by the edge of a small pool in the woods by Frank's cabin. Bright afternoon sunshine reflected off the water as I sat with a sketch pad in my lap, making pencil drawings. The last drawing I did was of Demon Leia, or at least my impression of what I looked like when the demon took over. I had to admit I looked pretty damned badass as a demon, though the whole experience still disturbed me. I had no idea of how I managed to transform into that thing, or if I would be able to do it again, never mind bring someone back from the dead as I did with Josh.

Not that I'd try, mind you. Once was enough for the time being. Eva was keen to examine me, to see what was going on in my body at a molecular level. I didn't feel any different aside from the fact that I never felt better. The demonic power was still in me somewhere, but it was buried deep. It was mixed up with the Light Energy, combined to make something new. I wasn't even sure if I could control the new power in me. I was more concerned about being normal for a while (or as normal as it was possible for someone like me to be), indulging my passion for drawing, smoking the occasional joint, trying to forget about the hellish ordeal I had been through. There was time enough to see what potential lay inside me.

Sleep wasn't good either. Since the showdown at the cemetery, I had been plagued by

nightmares, most of them featuring Abigor in his full demonic form. I knew the evil bastard was dead, that he could never try to hurt me again, but that didn't make the nightmares any easier. I hoped they would fade eventually.

Josh was doing okay, considering. He said he remembered everything from his time as a demon, though he wished he didn't. He had apparently seen and done some terrible things, things he would have to live with the rest of his life. He had also visited our Mom in Hell, just to torment her. That was messing with his head more than anything else. He stayed with Frank and me at the cabin for a day, but after that he took his car and headed back into the city to claim the apartment we had looked at what seemed like ages ago now. He said he would move in, try to resume his life as normal, maybe go to college. He had no interest in living his life as a Watcher.

He'd had enough of that stuff and I couldn't blame him.

Me, I couldn't just walk away from it all like Josh did. I was in too deep. I'd sold my soul for a start. It would only be a matter of time before the crossroads demon came to cash in his favor and take my soul after that. Then I would end up in Hell along with my mom. I intended to save her. If I was going to Hell, I'd find a way to get her and me both out of the place. How, exactly, I didn't know.

In the meantime, I would stay with Frank at the cabin. I had grown to like living up in the mountains. The air was clean and there were no people around to spoil everything.

I still hadn't fully forgiven Frank for his affair with my mother, but I also realized it takes two to tango. My mom wasn't blameless in all that, far from it. But she was my Mom. Frank was my uncle. People made mistakes. Things never worked as planned— I knew that. Family is family though, and Frank was family. More than that, he was my Watcher mentor. That new part of my life I had accepted now, if not totally embraced.

Evil was out there and someone had to fight it.

Might as well be me.

****

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Hell Is Here (Watcher's Series Book 2)

Before You Go…

Hi,

I hoped you enjoyed reading this story as much as I did writing it.

When I decided to write a novel series, there was only one genre that interested me and that was the urban fantasy genre. I am a massive fan of TV shows like Supernatural and Grimm and I wanted to write a series of books along similar lines.

As a male writer, most people thought I was going to write a male protagonist for this series, but I thought, why conform to stereotypes? The truth is, I enjoy writing female protagonists and I really like how the character of Leia turned out. She has a lot of potential for development and I intend to stick with her for at least two more books, but probably more than that, depending on how things go and whether or not people like her.

As you've read the book, I would really love to hear your feedback on it. Feedback from readers is how I make my books better and give

people more of what they want to read.

You can do me a real solid by leaving a review of the book on Amazon. That would help me a great deal in terms of getting momentum behind the book so I can write more books in the series.

If you would like to sign up to my very infrequent newsletter so you can be the first to know about future book releases and other news then sign up here.

You can also contact me via email if you wish:
neal.martin@hotmail.com

Thanks again for reading the book!

All the best,

Neal Martin

About The Author

N.P. Martin is the author of a number of bestselling non-fiction books. He loves everything to do with urban fantasy, demons, the occult and kick ass characters. Writing is his love and passion and he blogs about it at his author blog. He lives in N. Ireland.